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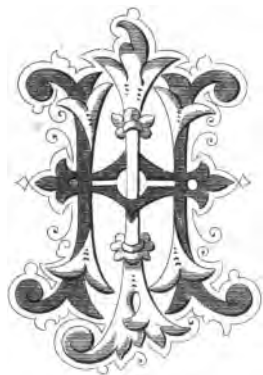
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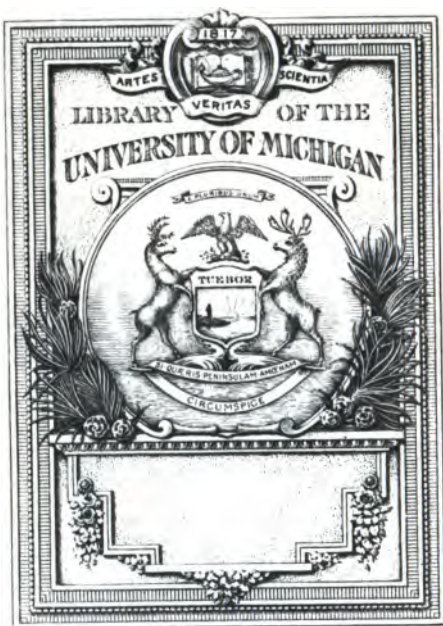
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Julia Hazlehurst.
Halton Grange.

828
H936L
1887



LADY BRANKSMERE



Hungerford, Mrs. Margaret Wolfe (H.M. 100)

LADY BRANKSMERE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'PHYLLIS' 'MOLLY BAWN' 'MRS GEOFFREY'

'DORIS' &c.

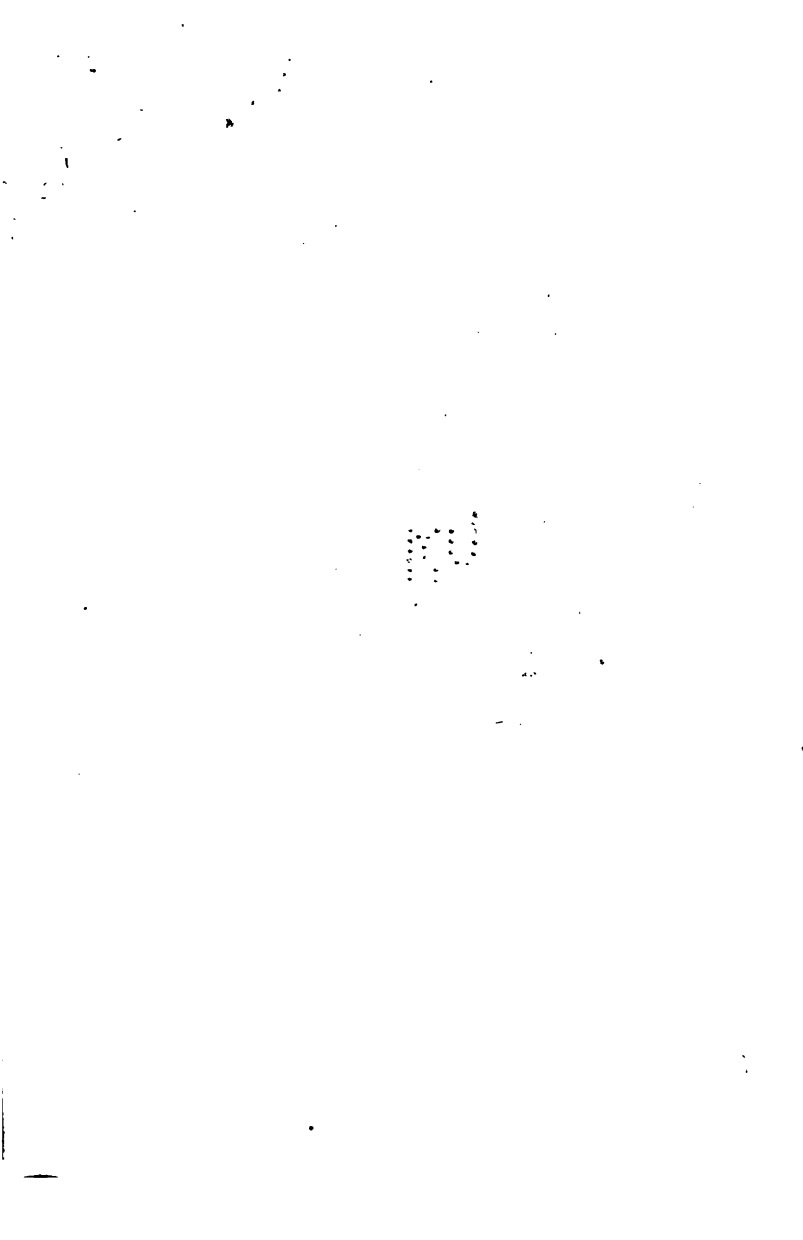


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LADY BRANKSMERE

CHAPTER I.

Be ready for all changes in thy fortune.

4-2-41 RN
In the orchard the sudden burning sun is drawing up a warm soft steam from the moist earth. Already the walks are growing carpeted with the white and pink wealth of the apple trees that are now so old and gnarled as to be venerable.

Soft gleams of light are stealing shyly through the branches, and are clinging tenderly to the ivied walls of the ancient gateway. Everything is so remarkably still that the humming of some bees in the blossoms near sounds ridiculously loud, and the twittering of the sparrows under the eaves almost oppressive. 'A sense of heavy harmonies' makes itself felt, and every moment the heat seems to grow more pronounced. Indeed, this April sunshine is as hot, as languorous, as though it belonged to its sister of June.

Last night the rain fell noisily, the morning as it broke was still washed with it, and the dawning was dull and sorrowful; but now a full and perfect noon is at hand, and the air seems only the sweeter for the refreshing showers that deluged the hours of darkness.

Some straggling rose-trees that are fighting hard with the gooseberry-bushes to fling wide their arms, are, even thus early, covered with red buds; drooping honeysuckles are making gay the gaunt old walls; and over there in the little three-cornered grass-plot—that is the joy of Angelica's heart

—a
Lilac's cleaving cones have burst,
The milk-white flowers revealing.

There is a bleating of lambs in the grassy fields below, a sound of quick life in the haggard where the young calves are sporting in the spasmodic awkward fashion that they know. A cry from the lone cuckoo comes from the dewy woods of Branksmere, far, far below. Nature has roused at last from its long rest; the world is wide awake; a young and happy world, growing hourly into a fuller beauty. Flowers are springing beneath the feet,

And grace and beauty everywhere
Are flushing into life.

Even the grey old house itself, that looks as if centuries of suns have gilded it from time to time, seems to-day to have yielded once again to this latest Apollo, and to have grown fresher, warmer, because of his embrace.

Outside the house, indeed, all is sunshine. Alas! *inside* all is gloom!

They are sitting, every one of them, in the old schoolroom, in solemn conclave, and in a stiff, though unpremeditated circle. As a rule, it is towards this rather dilapidated apartment they always verge when perplexed, or rejoiced, or angered about anything. Margery is sitting well forward on her chair with a little angry pucker on her pretty forehead. Angelica, a little slender maiden, with a face that resembles her name, is looking distressed; Peter embarrassed; Dick has taken his sleek head into his hands and is gazing moodily at the carpet, as though bent on piercing the inkstains to find the original pattern; the twins, sitting side by side in their little dimity pinafores, are plainly ready for open war at a moment's notice.

'To think that she should be coming *to-night*!' says Margaret at last. Now that Muriel has deserted the home nest and is away on her wedding tour, Margery, as Miss Daryl, seems to have gained a little in dignity. 'When it was a fortnight from us it seemed nothing—even a week ago we could breathe! But now—to-night!'

'It is terrible. I feel half-dead with fright,' murmurs Angelica plaintively. 'What will she do? Send us away?'

'Scatter us to the four corners of the earth, most likely. Turn us out of doors without a penny.'

'Won't she give us anything to eat?' asks one of the twins—Blanche—in an awe-stricken tone. She looks at May, her twin sister, who is a plump little thing of about eight or

nine, with a glance of the deepest commiseration. She herself is delicately fat too, and indeed the children are so alike in all respects, that without a distinguishing mark it would at times be impossible to know one from the other. Dormer, the old nurse, has sought to solve this mystery by the means of two little ribbons, one white, one pink, to be fastened somewhere on their frocks each morning. But what is easier to the frolicsome twins than to change their beds at night, when Dormer is loudly snoring, and confound by this means their identity in the morning. To-day, for example, by this simple device Blanche is May and May is Blanche. They are ingenuous children, and their countenances do not conceal the fact that they are in a frame of mind distinctly hopeful, anything in the shape of a row being sweet to their souls.'

'Not so much as a crust,' says Dick, the second brother lifting his pale student face from his hands to gaze at the children with brilliant eyes in which a quaint gleam of mirth is always shining. 'Out you'll go, supperless. Oh! what a little time lies between you and utter destitution. The day is far spent. Soon the night will be here, and with it our unknown but ogreish sister-in-law. Poor little May and Blanche, I pity you!'

'It won't be worse for us than for you,' says Blanche indignantly. But Dick has gone back to his original position with his head in his hands. Perhaps he is enjoying the situation a little!

'So odd, her never writing us a line,' says Margery. 'I argue from that, that she is sure to be a distinctly difficult person.'

'But perhaps if we—— Did any of us write to her?' asks Angelica nervously.

'Certainly not! Why should we?' demands Margery. 'When first Billy wrote to say he was engaged to her, we learned she was a person—a—a nobody, in fact, who was being paid by two old people (cousins or something of hers) to take care of them, and considering Billy, since poor papa's death, is the head of the house, and must be a baronet some day, we—we naturally thought he should have done better; so we didn't write to her.'

'And now the tables are turned,' says Peter, stretching his long arms lazily, 'and she is the Cræsus and we the poor connections. Well, I should think she'd remember it all. I'm rather repentant now we didn't write.'

'Things are different now, of course. Then she was—goodness knows who—now she proves to be General Ormerod's niece,' and has come in for a tremendous fortune by his death.'

'Why couldn't Billy have given us a hint?' murmurs Angelica. 'Or, why didn't we write afterwards?'

'Because we were ashamed,' guesses one of the twins promptly; she is instantly crushed.

'Nobody is ashamed!' says Margery, with a rather heightened colour. 'But we need not waste time discussing absurdities. The thing is that Billy and she are coming here to-night from their honeymoon, and that I expect we shall receive but scant civility at her hands. Oh! If Muriel were only here to help us.'

'Now, that's a thing that makes me more uneasy than anything,' says Dick, suddenly growing intensely earnest. 'Muriel's marriage, I mean. Did you notice her face the day of the wedding? It was a study. What was there in it when she stood at the altar with Branksmere? Was it terror, or nervousness—or—or hatred?'

Margery has brushed a book off the table near her with an awkwardness foreign to her, and now stoops to pick it up.

'Hatred of whom?' asks Angelica.

'Why, that is just it, of course. Of whom? Staines was in church, but I should think it was all at an end between him and her, or she wouldn't have married Branksmere.'

'Yes, I saw Staines. Considering the marriage was so private, and considering, too, that he had once been a lover of hers, I thought it in excessive bad taste his being in the church that morning,' says Peter slowly.

'Then where does the hatred come in?' asks Angelica curiously. Margery casts a swift glance at her, but the younger girl does not catch it.

'Where, indeed?' says Dick, a little vaguely. 'Not for Staines, according to Peter; and not for Branksmere, I—suppose.'

'Let us keep to the subject in hand,' says Margery, perhaps a little sharply. 'How can you all guess and worry about an imaginary ill, when the real thing is so near?'

'What a change it will be,' says Dick suddenly, as if following out a train of thought. 'Billy, who has been so seldom here, now Master; and Margery deposed from her post as Mistress, for an utter stranger. Something tells me

we shall be not only the wiser, but the sadder, for the coming of this new young woman.'

'Perhaps she is an old young woman,' says Angelica.

'Catch Billy doing a thing of that sort,' remarks Peter. 'Not likely. She's young, you take my word for it. And they say youth is intolerant. Dick, I share your uncomfortable presentiment. I feel we have caught a Tartar.'

'Poor old Billy! If that be so, there is a pebbly walk before him,' says Angelica with a sigh. 'And when one comes to think of it, I believe Billy was about the best of us, too.'

'He *was*,' says Peter, in the subdued tone of one who is conversing about his beloved dead. 'From my soul I'm sorry for him! Marriage with a woman of that sort—a virago, as I feel sure she is—means eternal misery. Because if you don't murder her by quick means, she murders you by slow ones. Billy used to be as good-natured a fellow as one could ask to meet. What he is now, beneath that woman's influence, I don't pretend to know. Dear old boy; he has my sympathy at all events. He was always so quiet, so—so——' Here his eloquence receives a check. 'What is the word? So—confound it,' says he—'what I mean is that he was so——'

'Quite so!' interrupts Dick gravely. 'I entirely agree with you; I am sure he was all that and a great deal more.'

'I wish to goodness Muriel hadn't chosen this time of all others to go and get married,' says Margery almost indignantly; 'she would have been the correct person to receive them. She is always so calm, so self-possessed. There is a dignity about Muriel that nothing could ruffle. Not even a sister-in-law who is coming to drive us all into the wilderness.'

'A rash statement,' says Dick sententiously.

'Not a bit of it. Do you think twenty Mrs. Daryls could make Muriel tremble? On the contrary, the twenty would tremble before her.'

'My dear. Pray spare poor Billy. He is not the anxious proprietor of a harem; he is afflicted with only one sultana.'

'Pshaw! I'm not thinking of Billy,' says Miss Daryl impatiently, 'but of Muriel. I wonder you can all be so blind to the fact that *she* is the one who could have coped successfully with this—this——'

'*Entr'acte*,' suggests Dick.

'This difficulty. She is the only person I know who

never gets frightened or flushed by pressure of circumstances; who defies nervousness. Altogether,' cries Margery, with a glow of admiration, 'I regard Muriel as one whose dignity could not be lowered.'

'She must be a phenomenon, then,' says Dick, 'as I never knew anyone whose dignity could not be destroyed by a well-planted blow in the stomach!' This low and rude piece of information is received in utter silence. The twins are guilty of an ill-timed attempt at a giggle, but are summarily hushed into a silence befitting the occasion.

'Perhaps—after all—Billy's wife will be nice,' hazards Angelica vaguely. Everybody stares. This startling suggestion puts Dick's vulgar speech to flight at once. It is no more remembered.

'Nice! Nonsense. What would make her nice?' demands Margery. 'Did anybody ever hear of a nice heiress? They are all the poorest of poor creatures.'

'No!' exclaims Blanche breathlessly. 'Well, I never knew that before! I always thought an heiress was a person with big bags full of gold!'

'And?'

'And now you say she is a beggar,' says the child excitedly. 'The poorest of the poor.'

'May blessings light upon your verdant head,' interposes Peter gaily. 'No, my good child, you are wrong for once. Our heiress is not a beggar.'

'She'll be worse than the usual run of 'em, I shouldn't wonder,' says Dick, with predetermined misery. 'Her being so abjectly poor when Billy first met her and fell in love with her will only heighten the arrogance that I feel certain distinguishes her now. That sudden springing into a fabulous fortune will make her doubly unendurable.'

There is so much grim prognostication in his tone that Margery's heart dies within her.

'Oh, that it was to-morrow morning!' she cries pathetically. Upon her, as Miss Daryl, will fall the horrors of having to make a gracious display of welcome.

'I wonder when she became rich she didn't throw Billy over with a view to gaining a more distinguished *parti*,' some one is saying when she brings herself back from her dismal imaginings. It is Angelica who is speaking, and her speech, savouring as it does in an aside sort of way of a wish to take the part of the new-comer, is received with a marked disfavour.

'I dare say she was ashamed! Things had gone so far with her and him,' says Peter, who, though as a rule careless of his neighbour's shortcomings, seems determined to find fault with the new sister thrust upon him. 'But I expect why she didn't brave everything, even the world's censure, was because Billy must get Uncle George's title sooner or later. And a title is dear to the soul of the *parvenue*.'

'She can't be called that, Peter. It appears she is as well born as any of us. But her father was so poor that——'

'Well, yes. That's so, of course,' acknowledges Peter magnanimously. 'But what I mean is that she wanted to be "my lady."'

'A barren title: and besides, Sir George is good for many a year yet. The last accounts from Italy were very discouraging.'

'By-the-by, our maternal uncle is also doing very nicely. No sign of a break-up there, either.'

'I hope not. Until I can take my degree at Cambridge, at all events. I can't say I admire Sir Mutius as a private individual, but as an uncle who can pay my college fees he is—pretty well.'

'"Sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child,"' quotes Dick mournfully.

'I'm not his child, the gods be praised,' returns Peter, stretching himself lazily.

'Has a serpent got a tooth?' asks fat little May, with round open eyes of wonderment. 'I thought they sucked everything!'

'I know one serpent who has got lots of teeth,' responds her youngest brother, with calm but crushing force. 'Regular molars!'—this last word seems full of doubt and horrible suggestiveness to the listening May—'and it is coming here to-night!'

'Don't be filling her poor little head with nonsense, Dick,' says Angelica softly.

'I don't know how Sir Mutius could be poor mamma's brother,' ponders Margery. 'One—so soft, so sweet, so perfect; the other—ugh!' She purses up her pretty mouth into a regular O of disgust.

'He looks so commonplace,' continues Angelica, 'so vulgar. He says his lineage is above reproach, and the title certainly is old—but, Mumm! Was there ever such a name? It suggests nothing but trade and champagne.'

‘Tell him so.’

‘Thank you! I don’t want my head in my hand.’

‘What a combination the entire name is. Sir Mutius Mumm! I’m certain our maternal grandparent was a wit, and gave that Christian name to his only son as an heirloom.’

Margery leans back in her chair as she says this, and, forgetful of the coming misery, laughs aloud. Such a gay, pretty, heart-whole laugh! It does one good to hear it.

‘Is it possible that I can hear you jest with such trouble staring us in the face?’ says Dick reproachfully. ‘Think of to-night, and what it is bringing you.’

‘It will bring Billy too, though,’ says Blanche, with a touch of defiance in her childish treble. ‘Billy won’t let her touch us.’ She has evidently great faith in the eldest brother.

‘Billy indeed! I expect we shall have to call him William now,’ declares Margery gloomily.

At this Blanche gives way to a sudden irrepressible sense of amusement, and chuckles very loudly.

‘Fancy calling Billy—William! Oh! it’s nonsense, stuffy nonsense. “Good morning, William”’—putting on a grown-up air—“I hope I see you well, William!” Ha, ha, ha! I never could do that. I don’t care what his wife says, I’ll always call him Billy. Why he doesn’t look like anything else.’

‘Wait till Mrs. Billy hears you. She’d be as mad as a hatter if she heard such a disrespectful, frivolous term applied to HER husband!’

‘If she is,’ murmurs Angelica, patting the twin’s dimpled hand reassuringly, ‘we’ll tie her!’

At this time-honoured joke they everyone laugh in a body, with all youth’s tenderness for an ancient friend, as though it was the freshest in the world.

‘Mrs. Billy,’ repeats Margery softly from the low seat near the fire. ‘Ah! how I wish she was some one who might be called that. It would so settle things.’

‘Don’t delude yourself with false hopes; I’m certain——Blanche, if you persist in playing the fool with those straws and the fire, you’ll see yourself presently at an untimely end; and I don’t suppose our new relative will be pleased to find the house redolent of roast pork on her arrival.’

‘Peter! Don’t be horrid.’

‘Oh! yes; it is quite true,’ cries May excitedly. ‘I read the other day that Mr. Mongoose, the African explorer,

declared human flesh was quite—quite—that is—he said we were all pigs.’

‘May! If you will read abominable things of that sort, please keep them to yourself. Oh! dear, how the twilight is coming; soon it will be night, and then—— I don’t in the least know how I shall receive her.’

‘Throw your arms around her neck. Press her to your throbbing *boo-o-som*. Break into sympathetic sobs, and cry, “Sweet sister, how glad I am to welcome you to these ancestral halls.”’

‘Not if I know it,’ exclaims Miss Daryl indignantly. ‘I think I see myself, indeed!’

‘Very silly of you, my dear; there isn’t a looking-glass within a mile of you, so far as I know.’

‘I wonder if she will be big?’ twitters May, who is rather irrepressible, alluding to the unknown Mrs. Daryl.

‘Huge!’ replies Dick promptly. ‘A regular strapper! Stands five foot eleven in her vamps. And walks about the farm all day long in top-boots and leggings, and a cart-whip, with which she lays about her generously. There is one small peculiarity, too, in our new sister which may be mentioned,’ continues Dick, leaning confidentially towards the somewhat disconcerted twin—‘she can’t bear *little* girls. Any sort of girl is obnoxious to her, but little ones drive her into a fine frenzy. I have heard from reliable authority that she could willingly—nay gladly—flay them alive!’

‘Oh, Dick!’ says May, whimpering sadly.

‘Fact, I assure you. I’m awfully sorry for you and poor Blanche, but I don’t see how I can help you. I doubt there’s a bad time before you.’

‘Richard, to business!’ interrupts Margery shortly. ‘You’ll give that child softening of the brain if you persist in your present evil courses. I am sure, too, it is foolish to be so down-hearted. Billy will see that we are not altogether flung upon the world.’

‘I dare say. But Madam will see that we march, nevertheless. She will hardly like to have so many guests perpetually in her house.’

‘Who can blame her? I shouldn’t like it either,’ murmurs Margery sighing, ‘Perhaps she will effect a compromise and propose keeping the children here with her.’

At this hopeful prospect the twins, without a word of

warning, set up a dismal howling. Dick's picture is still fresh in their minds. They dissolve into floods of tears, and are with difficulty even so far restored as to be able to give a cause for their grief.

'Oh, Meg!' cry they, flinging themselves bodily upon Margery, 'you wouldn't do it. You know you couldn't do it! Oh! don't leave us behind you. If you must go, take us with you. Don't leave us alone with *her*. Don't give us up to that awful big woman with the cart-whip.'

Their wailing is piteous, and rather oppressive.

'What a nuisance you are, Dick,' says Peter impatiently, 'filling the heads of those silly children with such folly.'

'No—no, dear little cats, we will all go together,' Margery is saying soothingly to the twins. It is plain to everybody that she is very nearly on the brink of tears herself.

'Oh! why are we not more fortunate or more rich?' she sighs.

'I shouldn't care to be rich. I should like to be famous,' says Dick slowly.

'I shouldn't care to be either. Extremes are a bore. I only ask to be comfortable,' puts in Peter, with another lazy yawn. 'Even Croesus had his troubles. Money goes but a short way.'

'With some people certainly,' laughs Angelica.

'On the road to happiness, I would have added, my sweet angel,' says Peter. 'It's poor stuff, when all is told.'

'Is it? I should like to have a trial of it,' returns Margery dryly.

But Peter is not listening to her; he is instead caroling at the top of his fresh young lungs a verse in favour of his merry theory—

'Then why should we quarrel for riches,
Or any such glittering toys?
A light heart and a thin pair of breeches,
Will go through the world, my brave boys.'

'I don't think that's a nice song, Meg, do you?' asks Blanche, who has hardly yet recovered from the late storm. 'And I shouldn't like a *thin* pair of breeches when we start—would you? Because winter will be coming on, and we should be cold.'

This infantile touch of caution convulses Peter with delight.

'What shall we do when first she is cross to us, Meg?' asks May nervously, whose thoughts are still upon the 'big woman.'

'Fall upon her and rend her limb from limb,' suggests Dick severely.

'Smite her, hip and thigh,' supplements Peter.

'I wish Tommy was here,' says Margery suddenly. 'Though only a cousin, and quite the greatest fool I know, still he is a sort of person that one can speak to.'

'Or even Curzon,' murmurs Angelica. 'By-the-by, I wonder he hasn't been here all day.'

'I don't see what good he would be, except to sit in Meg's pocket and stare at her as if she had seven heads.'

'He doesn't sit in my pocket,' returns Miss Daryl indignantly. 'I never heard such a libel!'

'Even if he did, he might sit in a worse place,' says Angelica sweetly.

'Ah! talk of somebody,' cries Margery, quite forgetful of her ill-temper of a moment since, 'why there he is—coming across the lower lawn. I'll call him. He hasn't heard a word about their coming to-night.'

She runs to the window, pushes the casements wide, and makes a wild effort to attract the attention of the tall figure in the distance.

'Curzon! Curzon! Hi! Mr. Bellew! Drat him! I don't believe he has got an ear in his silly head,' says Miss Daryl, who is not particular as to the nicety of her language when immersed in the bosom of her family. 'Cur—zon! Curzon! I say!'

'Elegant language! Superfine, upon my word!' says a gruff voice at this moment. 'Does it come from heaven or the earth beneath?' A balcony runs outside the schoolroom, extending from it to the library, and over this balcony the voice seems to come.

'It's Grumpy himself!' exclaims Meg in a horrified tone, falling back into Peter's arms.

'Uncle Mutius,' whispers Angelica.

'Then mum's the word,' says Dick, throwing himself hurriedly into the nearest chair.

The heavy sound of pottering old footsteps, the thud of a stout stick, and now—Grumpy.

Sir Mutius, stepping through the open window into the schoolroom, looks laboriously around him. He is not,

perhaps, aware that there is a young man behind him, who is following his footmarks as fast as his legs can carry him.

‘So,’ says Sir Mutius Mumm, with a sniff, ‘this is how you comport yourself, Margery, when the eyes of your relatives are not on you?’

‘As—as I am now, uncle?’ demands Margery, who is sitting in the demurest attitude possible to her, with her hands crossed dutifully before her. ‘I—I am very sorry to disappoint you in any way, but I would not abuse your trusting nature, uncle, and conscience compels me to confess that I don’t always sit like this. Sometimes I—stand.’

‘And sometimes you holloa at young men out of a window,’ stutters Sir Mutius angrily. ‘How dare you be so impertinent to me, miss? D’ye think I haven’t got eyes in my head, eh?’

‘Even if you had, I don’t see how you could hear out of them,’ says Margery, who is in a mutinous mood.

‘What I want to know is,’ returns old Grumpy, striking his stick savagely upon the carpet, ‘how you, who probably call yourself a respectable young woman, can explain away the fact of having yelled an invitation to a young man across an acre of grass, and of having used in my hearing such a low term as “Drat it!” I only wish your aunt Selina had heard you.’

There is somewhere in the dim recesses of Mumm’s Hall a gaunt spinster, sister to Sir Mutius and aunt to the young Daryls, whose name, Selina, has been transmogrified into Selina by Sir Mutius.

‘That’s very unbrotherly of you,’ says Margery. ‘You should be anxious to spare her all the pain you can.’

There is a touch of open mischief in the lovely broad little smile that accompanies this wilful speech.

Sir Mutius swells with rage. He is a short, stout little man, with a corporation, an over-weening opinion of his own importance, a fiery eye, and a sandy wig. Besides all these qualifications, he has a temper that knows no control. What the crushing remark he is preparing Margery may be is never known, because at this moment the young man behind him comes into full view.

It is plain, however, to the Daryls that he had not known he was following Sir Mutius, because of the fall of his ingenuous countenance as his eyes meet those of the irate old baronet. He is a tall—indeed a splendidly built young man

—with a figure that Hercules need not have sneered at; but with a face, alas! that falls far short of the figure. His eyes, perhaps, are above reproach—so clear, so blue, so straight-looking they are; but as for the rest of him!—his nose is impossible, his mouth huge, his cheek-bones distinctly *en évidence*. As for his moustache, it is not worth speaking about at all, and his hair is abominably void of curl. He is ugly! There is no doubt about it—he is distinctly ugly; but with this saving clause—that nowhere, under any circumstances, could he be taken for anything but a gentleman.

The presence of Sir Mutius seems to freeze him in part. He pauses, with his foot midway between the balcony and the schoolroom, and looks anxiously at Margery.

‘Come in, young man, come in,’ says Sir Mutius, in an odious tone. ‘What are you afraid of, eh? Seems to me that a young fellow like you must consider himself almost one of the family, to enter a house through a window like a burglar, as you have done.’

‘And as you have done,’ says the new-comer smiling.

‘Never mind me, sir. An uncle may come in by a window, I suppose, when a young jackanapes—— Is there no hall door to this house, I ask, that you must needs charge through a casement as though you were a mounted dragoon, or the most intimate friend of the family?’

‘After all, Sir Mutius, perhaps I am that,’ says the tall, ugly young man, with a conciliatory smile. ‘Intimate, I mean. I’ve been coming here, off and on, ever since I can remember anything.’

‘Then the sooner you put a stop to your eternal comings, the better,’ says the baronet angrily. ‘Margery evidently expects your visits, and——’

‘Uncle!’ exclaims Meg, rising to her feet, with a face suffused with indignant shame.

‘I assure you, you are wrong. I did not come to see Margery. I came to see Peter about a terrier pup,’ interposes Mr. Bellew, with a haste that might be termed agonised. ‘You remember, Peter?’

Peter doesn’t; but with a noble desire to succour the weak, declares at once that the Irish terrier in the yard shall be Curzon’s without any further delay. There is no Irish terrier in the yard.

‘Thanks, old man,’ says Mr. Bellew heartily. At this moment he is indeed intensely grateful.

'I don't believe a word of it,' declares Sir Mutius, with true grace. 'Terrier! What terrier? Which terrier? I tell you, young man,' advancing on the astonished Curzon—but Angelica, who has been terrified all along, here rushes to the rescue.

'Oh! Uncle Grum—Uncle Mutius,' she corrects herself nervously, 'are we not unhappy enough without your adding to our misery? Mrs. Daryl, Billy's wife, is coming to-night.'

'I'm delighted to hear it. I hope she'll prove a woman of character,' says Sir Mutius, with a withering glance at Margery. 'You all require a person who would keep you in order.'

'To-night! Nonsense! Why, when did you hear?' asks Curzon in a low tone of Margery.

'A telegram to-day at one,' curtly. Then, with a return to that grievance arising out of his frequent worshipping at her shrine, 'Now I hope you see what your persistent and ill-timed visits here mean to me.'

'That I love you.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' says Miss Daryl indignantly. 'They mean public castigation at the hands of that bad old man. Oh! how I wish you were in *Jericho*!'

She moves away from him, glad in the thought that he is stricken to the earth, and advances on her uncle.

'Now that you have made us all unutterably miserable,' she says tearfully, 'I hope you'll go away. If that horrid woman is coming to-night, there are things that must be looked to. See!' with a little stamp.

'Dear Uncle Mutius, you will understand how busy we are, and have been, all day, and how many things have still to be done, and you will forgive Margery for seeming a little overdone,' puts in Angelica with her soft smile, squeezing the impetuous Margery's arm just a little. 'You are going now? Ah, that is good of you. Good evening, dear Uncle Mutius.'

There are moments when the youthful Angelica, who is yet only half child, half woman, seems older than Margery, who is quite nineteen. Peter is twenty, Dick seventeen. After Angelica there was quite a pause until the twins came—and the mother went. There was a pause, too, after the birth of Billy and Muriel, who are four, and three, years older than Peter; but after that the children seemed to tread upon each other's heels, so fast they came.

The mother's death had been hardly felt, they were so

very young. But with the death of the father—an event now two years old—there had come the sad knowledge of money's value, and all the petty miseries that accompany straitened means.

Sir Mutius—Mrs. Daryl's only brother—an old bachelor who lived at Mumm's Hall, a place situated about four miles from the Manor, where the Daryls reside, had looked after his dead sister's children in a snappish, unsympathetic fashion when the last blow fell, and the death of Mr. Daryl had been followed by the certainty that he had been living considerably beyond his means for many years, and that nothing but debts and a very insufficient income was all he left behind him—except the eight children.

That was—as I have said—two years ago, and the sadly, merry-mournful family had up to this struggled through all difficulties with a strength that only youth could grant; but now to-day fresh trials have seized upon them. The eldest brother, Billy, to whom, indeed, the house and land (such of it, at least, as is not mortgaged up to the hilt) belongs, is bringing home a bride. A stranger! Horrible word! And who is to greet her? Who? There is no one at all to go forward and face the enemy's guns, now that Muriel is away. Now that Muriel is married! And so strangely!

CHAPTER II.

When you come into any fresh company—1, Observe their humours; 2, Suit your own carriage thereto; by which insinuation you will make their converse more free and open.

'THERE'S a ring at the door bell; did you hear it?' cries Angelica, rising to her feet, pale and nervous. 'They have come! I feel it; I know it, by the cold thrill down my back.'

It is some hours later, and the Daryls are waiting *en masse* in the rather shabby library, and in the very lowest spirits, for the expected coming of their brother and his wife. Now at last all is indeed over!

'Yes! and there is the knock. They've come to a moral,' says Peter. The twins grow pale. All in a body move solemnly towards the library door.

'Good Heavens! Why isn't Muriel here to receive them?' gasps Margery, hanging fire on the threshold. 'Why am I to be the victimised one? I feel as if I should like to faint.'

'Peter! a pin,' says Dick, with stern determination in his tone.

'No, no. I'll go of course,' declares Meg hastily. 'Only ——' She pauses, and looks as though she is on the point of tears.

'Don't be a goose,' puts in Peter, not unkindly. 'She won't eat you! She can't even blow you into fine dust on so short an acquaintance. Here! step out. Put your best foot foremost. Quick march! And for goodness' sake, take that lachrymose expression off your face. It would hang you anywhere. If she sees she is unwelcome, she'll make it hot for us later on.'

'She'll do that anyhow,' says Dick grimly, to whom there is evidently a soupçon of enjoyment in the whole affair. 'Go on, Meg. You shouldn't scamp your duty.'

'I'm going,' whimpers Margery. She takes a step forward with what she fondly, but erroneously, believes to be a valiant air, and tries to think what Muriel would have done on such another occasion as this—Muriel, with her calm, haughty face, her slow movements that she hastened for no man's pleasure, and her little strange smile, so cold, so sweet, that could attract or subdue, as its owner willed. There is a dignity about Muriel that she wishes she could copy, if for 'this occasion only'—a *savoir faire*—a sense of breeding, a——

'Blanche, if you tread on the tail of my gown again,' breathes Miss Daryl at this point of her meditations, in an angry whisper, 'I'll tear you limb from limb.'

This awful threat being received by the culprit with the utmost indifference, the train once more advances. The hall is reached.

'Mary Jane is just opening the door, and her back hair is all down,' telegraphs Peter, over his shoulder. He is with the advance guard and has, besides, an eye like a gimlet. 'It is sticking out like a furze bush,' he goes on excitedly. 'To the front, Meg—and don't give Mrs. Daryl time to notice it, or our reputation is lost for ever.'

'And the time I took over that girl's get up,' groans Angelica despairingly.

'If you could just manage to throw yourself into Mrs. William's arms and lean heavily on her, all will be well,' whispers Dick. 'You're a well-grown girl, and weight always tells. Do anything—hurt her, even—but don't let her see our Mary Jane.'

'Oh, why wasn't Muriel here?' returns Margery, with quite a shiver of nervous horror.

'Go along—you'll do well enough at a pinch,' says her brother, noble encouragement in his tone, as he gives her a friendly push that sends her—with what the new-comers imagine to be most flattering haste—right into the glare of the lamp.

Here, at the hall door, there is a slight confusion. A little bundle, made up apparently of Eastern shawls, is standing near the hatstand. A young man is fumbling hopelessly with these shawls, and Mary Jane, who has now finally got rid of the small amount of wits that once were hers, is curtsying profoundly and unceasingly.

'After all she isn't Irish, she is a Hindu,' whispers Dick, 'she thinks she is once more in the presence of Vishnu, the Pervader. See how she mops and mows. Poor thing. She is very mad.'

Margery takes the final step.

'You have come, Billy,' she says, timidly advancing towards the young man who is trying so hopelessly to disentangle the little parcel of soft goods.

'So we have, so we have,' cries Mr. Daryl, in a cheery voice. He is a man of middle height, the very image of Margery, and he now abandons his efforts to unravel the little form, to go to his sister and give her a hearty hug. 'Oh! there you all are,' exclaims he delightedly, seeing the other figures drawn up in battle array in the background. 'Look, Willy! Here they all are in a body to bid you welcome.'

'Look!' laughs somebody from beneath the muffings. 'Oh! how I wish I could. I wonder if I'll ever look with living eyes on anything again! I'm just smothered.'

Billy having kissed the children, who are frightened, and shaken hands with his brothers, who are stolid, now once more attacks the bundle and finally brings out from it his wife with quite a flourish as if distinctly proud of her.

'He is new to it,' says Peter, with fine contempt, turning to Angelica.

'She's—she's pretty!' returns Angelica slowly, and as if just awakening to something.

The greetings, the introductions, have been gone through. Mrs. Daryl is quite a little woman, with clear eyes, that have looked with leisurely keenness at each of her new kinsfolk in turn. Her mouth, if firm, is pleasant. There is no self-consciousness about her, and no shyness whatever.

'Nice old hall, Billy,' she says smiling, when she has spoken to everyone and is at last at liberty to look round her.

Nice! All the Daryls exchange covert and furious glances with each other. Nice, indeed! when they have been accustomed to pride themselves upon it as being (which it really is) the finest hall in the county.

'I should just like to see the one she has been used to,' mutters Peter, with extreme disgust.

'Dinner will be ready in about five minutes,' says Margery suggestively. 'You must be very tired, and——'

'Dinner! Ah, you should have mentioned that, Billy,' says Mrs. Daryl brightly. 'We dined at Wotton about two hours ago, and to dine again so soon would be dreadful. As to being tired, I never felt fresher in my life. But you must all go to dinner, and——'

'We dined early. It makes no difference at all,' says Margery slowly. 'You will like a cup of tea instead, perhaps?'

'Presently. When I have talked to you all a little,' arranges Mrs. Daryl promptly. 'I think in the meantime—ah! what room is this?'

Margery had led the way into the drawing-room.

'A charming room,' declares the new-comer briskly, with a swift but comprehensive glance round her. 'But what ghastly furniture! We must turn it all out of doors or else relegate it to the garrets, and get something light—æsthetic—satisfying—eh?' with an airy wave of her hand. Indeed all her ways seem to be specially airy.

'That's the prelude to turning us out of doors,' whispers Meg gloomily into Angelica's ear. 'Well! nothing like knowing the worst at once!'

'What's outside?' asks Mrs. Daryl, pushing wide a window curtain and gazing into the still darkness of the spring night.

'The garden.'

'Ah! I wish I could see that!' cries she eagerly. She

seems thoroughly untiring and full of vivacity. 'Is it too dark, Billy?'

'Much too dark, and too chilly, besides,' returns he.

'How careful he is of her!' says Peter, in a moody aside. 'Seems to me she's as strong as a——'

He is evidently on the point of saying 'a horse,' but some innate breeding forbids him.

'So she is,' whispers Margery back, who, perhaps, understands him. And, indeed, there is something suggestive of strong and perfect health in Mrs. Daryl's small elastic frame, and fair face and eager eyes.

'It is rather late for the children to be up,' says Margery, addressing her new sister. 'I think I will take them away now, and give them their tea. Billy can show you everything,' with a faint smile.

'Of course. If they want to go,' says Mrs. Billy cheerfully. 'But perhaps they'd like a holiday from their beds in honour of me. Would you, mites?'

But the mites are too impressed by the solemnity of the occasion to do aught but hang their heads and behave abominably.

('Just like ill-bred little brats,' declares Margery afterwards, with an access of wrath that descends upon the luckless twins.)

'Ah! well, no doubt they are tired,' says Mrs. Billy genially. And so Margery carries off the disgraced babies to their tea in the schoolroom, where they are speedily joined by Angelica, Dick and Peter.

'What idiot said brides were shy?' demands Dick presently. 'Of all the effrontery, the coolness, the——'

'She is just what I said she would be.'

'She isn't in the least what *I* thought she would be,' says Margery, 'she—she's worse. Did you hear her remark about the hall?'

'And about the furniture?'

'I suppose she'll give us a week's grace,' says Peter thoughtfully. 'And then—where are we to go?'

'Ah! you are here, then?' cries a gay voice. The door is pushed open and Mrs. Daryl enters as though certain of a welcome. 'They told me I should find you in this room,' continues she, entering as composedly as though she had been an inmate of the house all her life.

'This is a very uncomfortable place for you,' declares

Margery, rising pale and unsmiling from behind the teapot. 'Let me take you to the library. I have ordered tea to be served there for you and Billy.'

'That's tea down there, isn't it?' nodding her head at the elderly teapot so well known to the twins.

'Yes—but in the library——'

'I know. I've been there. And very cosy it looked, but not so cosy as this. I think old schoolrooms the best bits of a house, don't you? And I should like some of your tea, and so would Billy.'

'She's evidently determined we shan't have even this poor room to ourselves,' mutters Dick indignantly. 'All or none, is her motto. Anything so indecent——! All this pretence at *bonhomie* is a mere dodge to prove to us that she is mistress of everything. That all the rooms belong to her.'

'Well, so they do—so they do!' returns Angelica with a fine justice. Then her feelings grow too much for her. 'But of all the mean actions——' she says, tears rising to her dove-like eyes.

'There were hot cakes in the library,' says Mrs. Daryl, who has seated herself at the table and is plainly waiting for her tea. 'Couldn't we have them in here? I'm certain the children would like them. Eh?' She pulls May towards her. Fat little May is not proof against this promising offer.

'I should,' she says shyly. She is staring at Mrs. Billy with her finger in her mouth, so does not see the concentrated glances of wrath showered upon her by the entire family.

'Good child!' laughs Mrs. Daryl.

At this moment Billy crosses the threshold.

'Billy, this little sister wants the hot cakes in the library,' says his wife, looking up at him. And after half an hour or so Blanche and May are at last dismissed for the night with as many scones on their conscience as size will permit.

The new-comers follow them very shortly—Mrs. Daryl having at last confessed to a slight sense of fatigue. She bids them all good-night in an airy cheery fashion, and leaves the room, in spite of the tired sensation to which she has acknowledged, in a breezy energetic fashion, suggestive of a mind that governs the slight body and is not easily to be subdued.

As she goes the storm bursts.

'Well!' says Peter, when the last sound of their footsteps has ceased upon the air, 'well! I *never*!' He might have

said more. He could never have said anything that conveys so expressively to his listeners the real state of his feelings.

'It isn't well. It is ill,' retorts Margery. 'I—it is disgraceful. She is determined to sit upon us.'

'She'll have something to do then, that's one comfort,' exclaims Angelica hysterically. 'And she can't do it all at once either, there's such a lot of us.'

'Don't be a fool!' says Peter, who is in no humour for jokes.

'Peter, don't be rude to Angelica,' interposes Margery indignantly, whose nerves are by this so highly strung that she feels it a necessity to quarrel with somebody.

'Who's rude?' demands Peter. 'I only advised her very gently not to jest on solemn subjects.'

'Very gently! You told her not to be a fool.'

'Well! Would you have me tell her to *be* a fool? You're all fools together, it strikes me. There isn't a grain of sense in any girl born.'

'I say, look here! Have it out to-morrow, you two,' cries Dick, 'but let us discuss the new Madam now, as she no doubt is discussing us at this moment.'

'That is, most unfavourably.'

'She is no doubt abusing us like a pickpocket,' mutters Peter dejectedly.

'She is arranging with Billy for our immediate dismissal, without a character, having paid all wages due.'

'Perhaps after all we weren't very nice to her,' says Angelica doubtfully.

'What's the good of being nice? In books they always do the correct thing at first, and get kicked out afterwards for their pains. I've read a lot about people-in-law. We have done the incorrect thing, and we shall be kicked out too, but we shall carry our self-respect with us.'

'That's about all,' puts in Dick grimly.

'She is—didn't anyone think her eyes lovely?' hazards Angelica. 'And her hands very small? Small as Muriel's.'

'No one,' declares Margery shortly. 'Come, let us go to bed and forget our misfortunes for a time if we can.' *

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Meantime another scene is taking place in the room over their heads.

'After all, Billy,' says Mrs. Daryl, with a jolly little laugh

as she closes the bedroom door firmly behind her, 'you were wrong. They didn't fall in love with me at first sight. You are a false prophet.'

'They—they were a little queer, eh?' returns Billy thoughtfully. 'I noticed it. But you mustn't mind that, you know. It'll wear off, and—and when they come to know you and understand you, there won't be a difficulty anywhere.'

'It is natural, I suppose,' muses Mrs. Daryl gravely. 'They must look upon me as a female Jacob. A supplanter, a usurper.'

'They mustn't be allowed to harbour that thought,' says her husband, turning quickly towards her, 'you are mistress here. The house is yours.'

Some sudden remembrance checks him here, and drives the colour to his cheek. 'A barren possession,' he says, laying his kindly, brown hand on hers; 'I wish there was something in it worth your acceptance.'

'It seems to me there is a good deal in it.' A second little laugh breaks from her.

Daryl looks at her anxiously.

'Too much you think, perhaps?' he says, a quick shade falling into his eyes.

For just the moment it takes her to read his thoughts she does not answer him; then,

'So that is what you are thinking!' she decides at last. 'Have I deserved it, Billy? I tell you, you are wrong—all wrong. The very spirit they displayed warmed my heart to them as no silly untried tenderness would have done. Had they thrown themselves into my arms, and affected a sudden love for me, I should have been troublesome, perhaps,' with a little grimace; 'but now! Why they seem to be real grit all through, and I'll stand to them for it, and make them like me, before I'm done with them.'

'That's my dear girl,' says Mr. Daryl.

'How they withdrew from me! Did you notice that boy with the big eyes? How distrustfully he let them rest on me! I shall take him for a ride to-morrow, and bring him home my slave.'

'They will all be your slaves in a month or so.'

'A month!' Mrs. Billy gazes at him earnestly as one might who is filled with surprise. 'How you underrate my abilities,' she says at last gaily. 'Be warned in time. Before to-morrow night I shall be not only tolerated, but warmly accepted by every member of this household!'

CHAPTER III.

The drying up a single tear has more
Of honest fame, than shedding tears of gore.

SHE was as good as her word. By the next evening they have all learned to smile upon her, by the end of the week they have all learned to positively court her society, which is fresh to the last degree. Yet still they are a little awkward with her, and a little uncertain as to her ulterior designs for their welfare.

As for Mrs. Billy, she is very well pleased with herself so far, and with her growing relations with them, and having no special designs in view, does not trouble herself to invent any.

One day, towards the end of this first eventful week, she walks into the schoolroom rather aimlessly, to find Margery there and the children.

'You here, Margery? Why, what are you doing?' asks she. She is dressed in a pretty white gown of some soft, warm material, the days being still a little chilly, and is looking cool, and fresh, and radiant. Margery, on the contrary, has a rather crushed appearance, and is distinctly warm and openly miserable.

'Teaching the children,' she answers shortly.

'Ah!' says Mrs. Daryl, surveying the hot cheeks of the three with evident surprise. Blanche, it appears to her, is full of tears; May just bereft of them; Margery herself seems on the very brink of them.

'What on earth are you doing it for?' asks Mrs. Daryl slowly.

'Because, however poor they may be they must not grow up altogether savages,' returns Margery, with some sharpness. Her irritation has not arisen out of the presence of her sister-in-law, but is rather due to an extreme exhaustion born of a long and fruitless argument with the twins, who have obstinately declined to take to heart the fact that twelve and nine make twenty-one. Perhaps Mrs. Daryl grasps the truth of the situation, because the amiability of her demeanour is undiminished as she sinks into a chair by the table and settles herself, Parisian robe and all, to business.

'Here! Give one of them to me,' she says briskly.

'To teach?' asks Meg aghast.

'To try and knock something into her brain. It's the same thing, eh? But to judge by you I should say it was no mean task. Give me Blanche. I expect she knows considerably more than I do, but with the help of a book I'll go in and win.'

'Oh, no! Indeed you mustn't. You haven't an idea what a worry it is. Billy won't like you to do it,' says Margery anxiously.

'Billy always likes just what I like.'

'You will hate it.'

'If I do I'll stop,' says Mrs. Billy imperturbably. And, Margery conquered, passes her over Blanche, and once more returns to the disturbed argument with May.

Five, ten, twenty minutes go by, with only a dismal sob or two, and a dull monotone, or perhaps a dismal blowing of the nose to break their deep serenity. Then suddenly, all at once, as it were, an awful disturbance takes place. Mrs. Billy has, without a moment's warning, flung her book into the fireplace, and has risen impetuously to her feet. Her fine eyes are flashing, her cheeks crimson.

'She ought to be killed—that child!' she cries, pointing to the terrified May. 'She ought to be exterminated before the world is made aware of her. She has no more brain than a—a fly.'

'May!' exclaims Margery, glancing reproachfully at the trembling culprit. Then some inward force compels her to defend the little sister who is staring at her imploringly with quivering lips. 'Usually she is a very good child,' she says, holding out her hand to May.

'Good. Good!' cries Mrs. Daryl indignantly. 'Then tell me, will you, why it is she will persist in bounding Europe on the north by the Mediterranean Sea? I warn you she is dangerous. She would turn the world upside down!'

Then in a moment the anger vanishes, and she lifts her hands to her head, and breaks into a fit of the gayest and most uncontrollable laughter.

'I wonder when I was in a passion before,' she says. 'How it relieves one. The worst of it is it doesn't last long enough with me; I don't get the good out of it. It evaporates before I'm done with it. Say, children, wouldn't you like a run? It's a most blessed afternoon. It's a positive sin to be indoors, I think. And as for Europe, I don't quite see

that I should cry over it, even if the Mediterranean did sit on its head.'

'I suppose they ought to get through the lessons they have prepared,' begins Margery doubtfully.

'So they have; every one of them, because they haven't prepared any. And from this hour out I fancy I know what we'll do. Our tempers wouldn't last through much of this sort of thing'—rapping the lesson books—'so we'll just pay some poor soul to lose her temper for us.'

'You mean——'

'I mean a governess.'

'You must not think of that,' cries Margery colouring hotly. 'We must not put you to that expense. My time is my own; I have literally nothing to do.'

'Quite as it should be with a pretty girl,' interrupts Mrs. Daryl quickly. 'Ah! experience has taught me that.'

'With so much time on my hands,' persists Margery, 'I feel I can do nothing better than teach the children and——'

'Learn to curse fate,' interposes Mrs. Daryl, with her merry laugh. 'Not a bit of it! Not while I'm here! A governess it shall be, and the children, believe me, will learn as much from her in one month as they do from you in six. We'll get an old maid, and make her very comfortable, poor thing!'

'But——'

'Not a word. Do you think I could sit still, or go out riding, and know you were ruining your constitution with such scenes as I have just gone through? Tut! What do you take me for? Come,' changing her tone again as if the subject is over and done with for ever, 'I want you to show me the rooms in the west wing. They are all out of order, Billy says; but that's what I like, it gives one scope for one's imagination. It permits one to give the reins to one's own taste in the matter of paint and gimcracks. Come!'

She slips her arm through Margery's, and the girl goes with her a step or two. There is indeed no gainsaying her. Then all at once Margery stops as if to argue the point anew, and Mrs. Daryl glancing at her, sees that her eyes are full of unshed tears.

'Too much geography, grammar, and sums, and far too much gratitude,' thinks she swiftly.

'Pondering on the children still!' she says smiling. Then she glances back over her shoulder at the twins, who are

sitting disconsolately in their seats chilled by the consciousness of having signally disgraced themselves in the late encounter.

'Get on your feet, you two,' she commands gaily, 'and pick me a bunch of daffodils for my room. And I'll tell you what,' beckoning them closer to her. 'From this day you shall have a whole month of pure and lovely idleness whilst I look north and south and east and west for the dragon I'm preparing for you.'

She laughs so pleasantly at this threat that the twins catch the infection of her mirth, and laugh too, and are indeed so delighted with her and the promised emancipation from the hated studies that their equanimity is quite restored. Can she, *does* she mean it? A month, mind you. A whole long splendid month of delicious idleness, with nothing on earth to do but to hunt at will the wily butterfly! Oh! what an angel in disguise their enemy has become.

They rise from their seats. Simultaneously, involuntarily, they clasp hands. They draw near.

'Is it true?' cry they in one breath.

'As true as that you are both the very prettiest pair of dunces!'

Mrs. Billy, having given voice to this medicated assurance, draws back, and providentially in time, supports herself against the ancient bookcase that for generations has shown itself proof against the severest onslaughts. This enables her to receive the shock of two small bodies flung convulsively and without warning upon her breast, with at least a show of valour.

'Oh!' gasps May hysterically, clinging to her. 'Wasn't it a good thing for us that you married Billy!'

'Flight, however ignominious, means life,' gasps Mrs. Billy; 'so here goes!'

She tears herself away from the grateful twins, seizes Margery's wrist, and with her escapes into the cooler hall outside.

'Now come and show me the uninhabited parts, the rooms where the ghosts walk,' she says gaily, springing up the beautiful old staircase two steps at a time.

'Only there isn't anything so decent as a spirit,' returns Margery, following her swiftly. 'A sell, isn't it? It is just the sort of rambling old tenement that should possess a gentleman with his head tucked well beneath his arm. But, alas! he has never turned up. Mean of him, I call it.'

In truth it is a very picturesque old mansion, though sadly out of repair, with a queer, dusky hall of huge dimensions. A hall full of ancient cupboards, and a big fireplace where the traditionary ox might have been roasted whole—almost. The mantelpiece rises to the very ceiling, which is vaulted, and both are so black with age that it is impossible at a first glance to pick out and piece together properly the carvings on the former.

Doors lead off this hall to right and left, and two long corridors shrouded by moth-eaten curtains are dimly suggested. Mrs. Billy is openly pleased with everything. Standing on the top of the quaint staircase, as broad as it is shallow in steps, she looks down into the gloom beneath her, and seems enraptured.

‘It only wants a word here, a touch there,’ she murmurs, casting a glance full of artistic appreciation around. ‘A prince might be proud of such a hall as that.’

‘It wants considerably more than a touch,’ says Margery, who, after all, is accustomed to the beauty of it, and is not carried away by its charm. To her the chairs, the antlers, the tables are all only so much lumber; and, indeed, the entire furniture throughout the house is old, not to say crumbly.

‘Well, it shall have it,’ answers Mrs. Daryl. ‘It is worthy of all care and consideration.’ She turns, and they continue their way, peering into this room, peeping into that, to find them all dilapidated and shorn of their decorations of all sorts, the finances of the two last generations having been found very insufficient when applied to the keeping up of so large a house. The Daryls for the past two centuries had apparently taken for their motto, ‘Love and the world well lost,’ their beautiful wives bringing nothing but their fair faces and a stainless ancestry to the empty coffers of their husbands. It had not been Billy’s fault that he had been false to the creed of his ancestors. He had loved, and had wooed and won his sweetheart when she was without a penny in the world; and does not, because he could not, love her a whit the more today in that she is an heiress to a rather fabulous extent.

‘Take care,’ cries Margery suddenly, ‘a step leads down into this room. It takes one unawares as a rule. But I want you to see this room of all others. The view from it is so perfect, and the windows are so quaint.’

‘Oh!’ cries Mrs. Billy as she steps into it, with an admiration in her tone that leaves nothing to be desired. ‘What a

jolly little room !' She looks round her. ' Quite a mediæval little affair. It is a trifle too much for me, I confess, but you '—glancing at Margery kindly—' you like it, eh ? '

' Like it ! It is an ideal thing—a rugged poem ! ' cries Margery. Then she checks herself, and looks in a puzzled way at her sister-in-law. ' You who have such a fine appreciation of the really good, why do you disparage it ? ' she asks slowly. ' I thought of it all last night as a thing just suited for you, as a retirement—a retreat—a pet place to receive your favourites. It was a matter of covetousness to myself many a time, but you see it would be thrown away without its suitable adornments. Everything should be of its own time.'

' Except its mistress,' interrupts Mrs. Daryl, with a light laugh. ' That's the flaw in the present æsthetic run of thought. We can't produce a real *châtelaine*. We can't bring back a dame, severely Saxon, artistically pure, from the nauseous grave. And all the high-art gowns in the world don't seem to me to do it. One can see the nineteenth century training all through the puffs and wigs, and pensive poses.'

' You are a sceptic,' says Margery laughing.

' A Philistine, you mean. In some ways, yes. Exaggeration, don't you see, is odious to me.' Here she laughs gaily in unison with her companion. ' Tell you what, Meg,' she says, ' this room shall be yours. I'll have it done up for you, and you shall choose every stick for yourself. You are Miss Daryl, you see, and proper respect must be shown you. The school-room will do for the children well enough. It is comfortable, and there is something quaint about the tables and chairs, and the very inkstains of it. But the boys, I think, should have a den of their own. Of their very own, eh ? A sort of a snugger where they might knock around at will, and no one have the right to scold them for untidiness, eh ? '

There is something remarkably cheery in the way she has of saying that frequent ' eh ? ' Some thought growing within the mind of Margery renders her dumb.

' Well ? Why don't you speak, eh ? And why do you look at me like that—with such solemn eyes ? '

' I was just thinking,' the words coming from her slowly, ' that there are few women who could have come as mistress to a strange house and have adopted an unconscionable number of useless people in the sweet spirit that you have done ! Why, what are we to you ? ' cries the girl, coming more into the sunlight and spreading out her hands as if in

protest. 'An encumbrance, a worry, beings of no moment at all in the life that is just beginning for you. Yet it seems as though you had made up your mind to us—to——'

'Look here! If you only knew——' interposes Mrs. Billy.

She seats herself with very rash promptness upon a moth-devoured seat in one of the windows, and pulls the girl down beside her. There is a secret nobility about this seat, in that though it totters to its fall, it makes one last effort and manages to keep erect for still another half-hour. How could it upset so charming a cargo?

'Don't you get it into your silly old noddle,' says Mrs. Billy, who takes no thought for her language, 'that I'm making sacrifices for my husband's people, or anything of that sort. It would be a downright fraud if you brought your mind to that. I'm delighted, glad, thankful to have you all here. Taken that in, eh? Delighted—see? I have been so long left alone, with only two old frowzy people to stare at day after day—fossils who were always on the very brink of the grave, but who wouldn't go into it—that the sound of the laughter that comes from all you girls and boys is, I consider, grand: the very sweetest music. Taken all that in? Why, that's right!'

'But—to be never alone with Billy——'

'There isn't a "but" in the whole of it. I defy you to find one, my good child,' interrupts this energetic young woman promptly. 'If you think I'm the sort to be miserable unless my husband is in my sight all day, or I in his, you've made a mistake, that's all. I'm not of the sickly sentimental order by any means. Yet,' glancing swiftly at Margery, 'you know that I love Billy, with all my heart and soul, eh?'

'Yes,' gravely. 'I know it.'

'I should, you know. He rescued me from a very slough of despond. He was the first bright thing I had come in contact with. I can tell you I rubbed myself against him vigorously, and sparks was the result. He was charming to me; he treated me as though I were really a young girl, and not a mere beast of burden—a sort of superior, upper servant—a being a degree better than Martha in that I did not misplace my *h's*, and could sit in a drawing-room without looking awkward. He came; he loved me; poor, dependent, as I was. And he is one of you! Do I not owe you love for his love?'

'Your life was miserable?' asks Margery, bending eagerly towards her.

'Monotony is the worst of all miseries to some natures. They were not absolutely unkind, but I felt "cribb'd, cabin'd, confin'd," every moment of my day. Oh! the horrible readings aloud to that old man until my throat was sore! the eternal windings of that old woman's skeins! I wonder I never gave way to my inner promptings—that I abstained from murder or suicide; I was almost at the end of my patience, I can tell you, when Billy came upon the scene. Well! you know all that. And he loved me at once, somehow; all in a moment as it were—just as I loved him.'

'That is the true way.'

'Yes—isn't it? What a nice girl you are, Margery! And I hadn't a single halfpenny then, so he must have meant all he said, eh? I like to dwell on that; it makes me feel right down proud, somehow; but you mustn't mind me. Then the old General died, and somebody found out I was his nearest of skin—kin—what is it? And all at once I became not only an heiress, but an enormous one.'

'Not so very enormous,' says Meg, smiling and pointing meaningly to the little rounded thing talking so fluently.

'Eh? Oh no; of course not in that way! But it was all like a fairy tale, wasn't it now? The night it was finally settled, and my claim to the money established beyond a doubt, I laughed in my bed, I can tell you, when I thought of how comfortable I could make my Billy.'

'Then?'

'Then we got married. I quitted for ever the shade. I rushed headlong into the sunshine. Billy and I dawdled about a good deal in Paris and Brussels, but the first glimpse of home I had ever had in all my life was on the night I arrived here.' Involuntarily, at this, Margery winces, but evidently there is no *arrière pensée* in Mrs. Billy's conversation. 'You all met me. You are, therefore, bound up in my first impression of what home means. You were a continuation of the sunshine that had come to me with Billy. This old house, all of you, everything, seems blended into one sweet, satisfactory whole. I couldn't bear to be in an empty house. To confess a truth to you,' says Mrs. Daryl, bending forward, 'I love noise! Taken all that to heart?'

'Yes, all,' replies Margery earnestly.

'Then it only remains for you to take *me* there, too!' says Mrs. Billy smiling. Margery, driven to a sudden impulse, turns to her and flings her arms round her.

CHAPTER IV.

Oh ! thou hast set my busy brain at work
And now she musters up a train of images,
Which, to preserve my peace I'd cast aside
And sink in deep oblivion.

THERE is a silence that lasts for quite a minute: then, 'I love you,' says Margery simply, a little tremor in her voice.

'That's all right. Quite right. That is just as it should be,' sweetly. 'And now we are real sisters, without any law about it.'

'And we—we thought we should have to leave the Manor,' begins Margery, a little guiltily, full confession on the tip of her tongue, but Mrs. Billy will not listen.

'Rubbish,' she cries gaily; 'as if this dear old shed isn't big enough to hold a garrison! Why, if we do come to logger-heads or a pitched battle, there's plenty of room here in which to fight it out; that's one comfort. Why so serious, Meg?'

'I was thinking May's thoughts. How well it is for us that you married Billy!' Her eyes are full of tears.

'And doubly well for me. By-the-by, there is one of you I seem to hear very little about—Lady Branksmere—Muriel.'

Margery getting up from the crazy old seat goes somewhat abruptly to the window.

'We don't as a rule talk much of each other,' she says after a slight pause.

'Well, do you know, I think you do, a considerable lot at times,' returns Mrs. Billy, with quaint candour. 'But of her—never! I knew her marriage was a surprise to you all, because Billy was so taken aback by it (we heard of it when on our tour). But why? That is what I want to know. Tell me about it.'

'About it?' Miss Daryl colours faintly, hesitates, and looks confused. 'About what?'

'Look here,' says Mrs. Billy good-naturedly, 'if it is anything that requires you to think before answering, of what will sound well, don't mind it at all. I would far rather you didn't answer me.'

'Yet, I should like to speak to you of her. It would be a relief—a comfort,' exclaims Margery eagerly, 'though, indeed,

I hardly know what it is I want to say. You are one of us now—her sister as much as mine—why then should I be silent about her? My manner,' impatiently, 'is absurd. One would think by it there was some mystery in the background; but in reality there is nothing.'

'Things often look like that.'

'It was all terribly sudden, terribly unexpected. The marriage with Branksmere, I mean. She had always avoided him, as I thought—had—had in fact'—with a little rush—'given us the idea that she rather disliked him than otherwise, so that when one morning she came into the schoolroom and said in her pretty, slow, indifferent way that she was going to marry him in a month, we were all so thunderstruck that I don't believe one of us opened our lips.'

'A wise precaution.'

'I'm not so sure of that. I doubt our silence offended her. "Your congratulations are warm," she said, with that queer little laugh of hers which you will come to understand in time. It was cruel of us, but we were all so taken aback.'

'It was startling, of course. Tell me,' stooping towards Margery, and speaking very clearly, 'was the other fellow desirable?'

'The—the other f——'

'Why, naturally, my dear child! It would be altogether out of the possibilities not to think of *him*. When a woman gets engaged and married, all in one second, as it were, to a man whom she appeared to dislike very cordially, the mind as a rule is alive to the knowledge that there is another man hidden away somewhere.'

'I know so little, I imagine so much,' says Margery, with quick distress, 'that I am half afraid to speak. But I always thought, until she declared her engagement to Lord Branksmere, that she liked some one—a great contrast to Branksmere—who had been staying down here with some friends of ours for several months in the autumn. Whether he and she quarrelled, or whether she threw him over, or whether he tired, I know nothing.'

'Pity I wasn't here just then. I'd have seen through it all in the twinkling of an eye,' declares Mrs. Billy naively.

'Muriel is difficult, you must understand. One cannot read her, quite. Yet I did fancy she was in love with Captain Staines.'

'Staines, *Staines*!'

'That was his name. He was staying with the Blounts, who live two or three miles from this. Know him?'

'It is quite a usual name, no doubt,' says Mrs. Daryl, in a tone that might almost suggest the idea that she has recovered herself. 'Yet it gave to me a train of thought. "Know him?" Well—one can't be sure. Short little man, eh?'

'Oh! no. Tall, very tall.'

'Stout?'

'Meagre, if anything. A handsome figure, I suppose,' doubtfully, 'but too much of the hair-pin order to suit me.' But, at all events, I know he could lay claim to be called distinguished-looking.'

'Most dark men look distinguished.'

'He isn't dark. Fair if anything.'

'Fair, and tall, and slender. Ah! he can't be the man I mean,' says Mrs. Billy slowly. Then: 'When do you expect Lady Branksmere home?'

'To the Castle, you mean. I don't know. She has never, during all her wedding trip, written so much as a postcard to one of us. Odd, isn't it?'

'Suggestive, at least.'

'Of what? Happiness?'

'Let us hope so. But what a long time to maintain a settled silence!'

'Too long. She is coming home; we hear—through the Branksmere steward.'

'When?'

'Any day—any hour, in fact. They have been sent word to have the Castle put in order to receive the new Lady Branksmere at a moment's notice.'

'I see,' says Mrs. Daryl thoughtfully. She had walked to the window a few minutes ago, and is now staring out into the shrubberies that guard the garden paths. Presently her gaze grows concentrated upon one spot.

'Margery, come here!' she says, in a low tone. 'Within the last minute or two I have become aware that there is a strange man in the garden! He is gazing about in a most suspicious manner. What can he want? See! there he is. Ah! now you've lost him again. He appears to me to keep most artfully behind the bushes. Can he be a burglar taking the bearings of the house with intent to rob and murder us all in our beds?'

Margery, coming nearer, peers excitedly over her shoulder at the suspicious-looking person in question. As she does so her face grows hot. The bushes may hide his individuality from a stranger, but to her that grey coat, those broad shoulders, are unmistakable; she gives way to a smothered ejaculation.

'You know him? It is true, then. He is a person of bad character in the neighbourhood?' exclaims Mrs. Daryl, looking round at her.

'Oh, as to that, no! I don't think it is a burglar,' says Margery, temporising disgracefully. 'It's—it's nobody, in fact. I fancy, as well as I can see, that it is a Mr. Bellew.'

Ah! Mrs. Billy grows even more thoughtful. 'Mr. Bellew seems rather struck with the house. An architect, perhaps?'

'N-o. Only a neighbour. A friend of the boys, in fact. He comes here to see them very often.'

'That's kind of him,' says Mrs. Billy. She laughs a little. 'One would think it was the house he came to see,' she goes on meditatively; 'at least, that portion of it where the schoolroom windows begin. By-the-by, Meg, it is there you sit, as a rule, eh? I'd keep my eye on that young man, if I were you. He is up to something; I hope it isn't theft.'

'I hope not,' returns Miss Daryl, with an attempt at indifference. Then she gives way as she catches the other's eye, and breaks into petulant laughter. 'He is a thorough nuisance,' she says, in a vexed tone. 'He is never off the premises.'

'The boys are so attractive,' adds Mrs. Billy. 'At that rate, I expect the sooner I become acquainted with him the better. Take me down, Meg, and bring me face to face with him. As you evidently can't bear him, I suppose I had better begin well and rout him with great slaughter at this our first meeting. Shall I exterminate him with a blow, or——'

'Do anything you like to him,' says Meg, who is evidently full of rage when she thinks of the invader.

When they get to the small armoury door, however, that leads directly into the garden, she comes to a sudden halt.

'I think if you will walk rather slowly, I will just run on and tell him you are coming,' she says rather jerkily, looking askance at her companion as if a little bit ashamed of her suggestion, and then without waiting for an answer speeds away from her, swift as an arrow from the bow.

‘Just warn him that I’m coming—and so is his last hour,’ calls out Mrs. Billy after her, convulsed with laughter. But Miss Daryl refuses to hear. She hurries on through the old-fashioned garden, full of its quaint flower beds and odd yew hedges cut in fantastic shapes—past a moss-grown sun-dial, and the strutting peacocks and their discordant scream, until at last she runs almost into Mr. Bellew’s willing arms.

‘Ah! here you are at last,’ cries the young man in an accent of undisguised delight as she comes up to him breathless. ‘I thought you’d *never* come. Such a century as it has seemed. A whole week in town and not a line from you. You might have written one, I think! I got back an hour ago, and hurried over here to——’

‘Make an ass of yourself!’ interrupts Miss Daryl wrathfully, who has unconsciously adopted a good many of her brother’s pretty phrases. ‘And *here!*’—looking round her, ‘is this the only place you could think of? Is there no drawing-room in the house that you must needs be found prowling about the shrubberies? Anything more outrageous than your behaviour could hardly be imagined!’

‘Why, what on earth have I been doing now?’ demands Mr. Bellew, in a bewildered tone.

‘Mrs. Daryl has been gazing at you through an upper window for the last ten minutes, and very naturally came to the conclusion that you were a person of no character whatsoever. She was nearer the mark than she knew!’ puts in Miss Daryl viciously. ‘I didn’t betray you.’

‘Mrs. Daryl! What—the new woman?’ anxiously.

‘New? One would think she was a purchase. What an extraordinary way to speak of one’s sister-in-law!’ exclaims Meg, who is determined to give quarter nowhere. ‘Yes, she was so annoyed by your prowling that she is coming round presently to give you a bit of her mind.’

‘Bless me! I hope not!’ says Mr. Bellew, who probably had never known fear until this moment. ‘I—I think I’ll go,’ he says falteringly.

‘You can’t. She’s coming. Why on earth couldn’t you have called at the hall-door like any other decent Christian?’

‘Well, so I did,’ indignantly. ‘I did the regulation thing right through. Knocked at the “front door;” asked for Mr. Daryl; heard he was out; left my card, and then thought I’d come round here to look for you.’

‘Well, I won’t have it!’ decisively. ‘I won’t be followed

about by anything but my own terrier, and I distinctly refuse to be made by you the laughing-stock of the world. She was dying with laughter. I could see that. I tell you she thought first you had designs on the house. I had to explain you away. I had '—angrily—' to assure her you weren't a burglar, but only a person called Curzon Bellew.'

This contemptuously, and as though Curzon Bellew is a person distinctly inferior to the burglar.

'I won't come here at all if it displeases you,' says Mr. Bellew, in a white heat. 'Say the word, and I go for ever!' There is something tragic about this.

'Go, and joy go with you!' returns she scornfully.

'That is a kinder wish than you mean,' says the young man, clasping her hands. 'No. I won't go. Would I take joy from you? And do your words mean that if I went joy would of necessity go too?'

'Go too!' repeats Miss Daryl, but in a very different tone, and then, as though impelled to it by the glad youth within them, they both burst out laughing.

After a while Mr. Bellew grows grave again.

'Well,' asks he confidentially, 'what do you think of her?'

'Her? You should speak more respectfully of such a dragon as she has proved herself, if, indeed, you mean Mrs. Daryl. But why ask me for a photograph? She will be here in a moment to——'

'Yes, yes, I know,' hastily. 'That is why I want to be prepared. What is she like, eh?'

'All the rest of the world. She has a nose, two eyes, and a mouth;—quite ordinary. Disappointing, isn't it?'

'Then she isn't——?'

'No, she isn't!' saucily. 'What did you expect? An ogress?'

'Why, that was what *you* expected,' says Mr. Bellew, very justly incensed. 'You said——'

He is stricken dumb by the sight of a pretty little plump person who has emerged apparently from the laurel close by.

'You will introduce me, Meg,' says the vision, smiling friendly-wise at the disconcerted young man. Is this the ogress? the tyrant? the——

'Certainly! This is Mr. Bellew, a very old friend of ours,' says Margery, in the tone of one who evidently deems the Mr. Bellew in question of no account whatsoever.

'So glad to meet you, Mr. Bellew,' says Mrs. Daryl, with

the sweetest smile. 'Margery tells me you are quite an old friend with all here, so I hope by-and-by we, you and I, shall be friends too.'

Where is the ogress in all this? Mr. Bellew feels his heart go out to this pretty, smiling, gracious little thing upon the gravelled path.

'You are very good,' he stammers, feeling still somewhat insecure, the revulsion of feeling being extreme.

'Billy was out, then? I am so sorry. One of the servants told me on my way here that you wished to see him. Never mind. Perhaps—— What do you think, Margery? Perhaps your friend, Mr. Bellew, will dine with us without ceremony to-morrow evening?'

The two words—'your friend'—enchant him. From that moment Curzon Bellew is her slave. Margery murmurs something civil, and presently Mrs. Daryl, with another honeyed word or two, disappears between the branches.

'Well?' says Meg.

'Well?'

'She isn't quite the ogress you imagined, eh?'

'Why, it was you who used to call her that!' exclaims Curzon, with some righteous wrath. 'And now you try to put it upon me. It is the most unfair thing I ever heard of. You have forgotten, you know.'

'Unfair?'

'Yes. You said you were miserable at the thought of having to live with an ill-tempered——'

'That's right. Put it all upon me, by all means. I'm only a woman. Ill-tempered? Why, she is *sweet*! How can you so malign her?'

A voice comes to them through the twilight:

Margery! Margery Daw! Where are you? Come in. The dew is falling.'

Miss Daryl makes a step towards the house.

'Oh, Meg, to leave me without one kind word after seven long days. How can you?' cries Bellew, in a subdued tone that is full of grief.

'Well, there,' says Meg, extending to him her little, slender, white hand, with all the haughty graciousness of a queen.

'If I come to dinner to-morrow night, you will be glad?'

'Glad? It won't put me out in the least, if you mean that,' says Miss Daryl, slipping from him through the dewy branches.

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The day has waned ; night—a dark, damp, spring night—has fallen upon the earth. There is an extreme closeness in the air that speaks of coming storm. The shadow of a starless night is thrown over the world that lies sleeping uneasily beneath its weight, and from the small rivers in the distance comes the sound of rushing, that goes before the swelling of the floods. Storm and rain and passionate wind may be predicted for the coming morn.

Dinner long since has come to an end ; it is now close on ten o'clock. Margery and Mrs. Daryl are sitting together in the library, before a blazing fire—rather silent, rather depressed in spite of themselves—a little imbued unconsciously by the electric fluid with which the air seems charged. The windows leading on to the balcony are thrown wide open. The fire has been lit as usual, but the night is almost suffocating, so dense and heavy is the still, hot atmosphere without.

‘One feels uncanny, somehow, as if strange things were about,’ says Mrs. Billy presently, with a rather nervous little laugh. ‘I can’t bear lightning, can you? And there is sure to be plenty of it before the morning. What a weird night! Look how dark it is without. Ah! what is that——?’

‘What!’ cries Margery in turn, springing to her feet.

There is a sound of light, ghostly footsteps on the balcony beyond, and from the sullen mist a tall figure emerges clothed from head to heel in sombre garments. It comes quickly towards them through the open window, the face hidden by a black hood, until almost within a yard or two of them. Then it comes to an abrupt stand-still and flings back the covering from its face.

CHAPTER V

Yea, this one's brow, like to a tragic leaf,
Foretells the nature of a tragic volume.

‘AH! Muriel!’ cries Margery, with a swift revulsion of feeling from fear to excessive joy. ‘It is only you after all. She runs to her, and encircles the cloaked figure with loving arms. There is a silent embrace between the sisters, and then, flinging her long covering somewhat impatiently from her, Lady Branksmere stands revealed.

A tall, slight woman, with a statuesque figure exquisitely

moulded. And a shapely head, superbly set upon her shoulders. She is gowned in some soft, black, clinging draperies, against which her naked hands and arms show with a dazzling clearness. There is a touch of sunlight in the rich brown of her hair, but her face is pallid almost to ghastliness, and beneath the great mournful eyes of deepest grey, purple shadows lie that tell of sleepless nights and a mind torn and racked by cruel memories. Her chin is firmly rounded, and her long thin fingers are peculiarly lithe and supple.

‘Muriel! To think of your coming back to us like this, so suddenly, without a word!’

‘I am not coming back, however. I am only lent,’ says Lady Branksmere, with a peculiar smile that is altogether without joyousness.

‘This is Wilhelmina: this is Billy’s wife,’ goes on Margery hastily, who might perhaps be suspected of being afraid to stop talking. She draws Muriel towards Mrs. Billy, who, up to this, has been too surprised to do anything.

‘Ah!’ says the new-comer expressively, with a sudden smile, which enables one to see that her perfect teeth are somewhat squarely formed, and that her mouth is large, and her smile, though beautiful, short-lived.

She goes forward and lays her pretty slender hand on Mrs. Billy’s arm, and looks at her long and attentively.

‘There was no exaggeration,’ she says at last, in a quick, restless way. ‘One can see how it is. One can understand. I am glad Billy is happy.’

She falls back from the sister-in-law after saying this, and appeals to Margery.

‘After all it is only barely just that some of us should be happy,’ she says, with a little laugh that is too graceful to be called forced, but that certainly never arose from a glad heart. ‘You have a charming face,’ she says to Mrs. Billy, looking back at her over her shoulder with a little nod.

There is a peculiar fascination in itself in the restless fashion of her speech. Mrs. Billy gives in to it. She, to whom shyness up to this has been unknown, stands now mute and wordless before this strange, lovely, imperious girl, who as yet is too newly wedded to have merged her youth into womanhood, and who has stolen upon her through the darkness, and dazzled her with her beauty. She has marked each charm with a curious care. The figure that would not have disgraced a Juno, the face so like a sorrowful Proserpine!

She is like a Venus, too, but in a pathetic fashion ; the ever-blossoming gaiety, the orthodox frivolity, of the one, being in such sad contrast with the mournful posing of the other. There is a condensed, a sure but subdued, passion about Muriel, that puzzles whilst it attracts the gentler nature of Mrs. Billy.

Still Muriel is smiling on her ! Then, all at once, as though the author of it is wearied, the smile fades, and the light that has grown within Lady Branksmere's eyes dies too.

'Well?' she says, sinking wearily into a chair. 'How are you all, eh?'

'As well as can be expected,' returns Margery gaily, who seems overflowing with joy at having her sister with her again. 'How good of you to come at once! How good, too, of Lord Branksmere to spare you!'

Lady Branksmere stares at her for a moment.

'Oh! yes; he spared me,' she says, with a peculiar laugh that jars upon her hearers, and somehow reduces them to silence.

Then as though struck by the effect of her words, and growing impatient beneath it, she springs to her feet.

'Show me the rest of the house,' she says hurriedly. 'I have thought of it, bit by bit, all the time I have been away, but now I want to see it. Come!'

As she gets to the door she turns again to Margery.

'Where are the children? Can I see them?'

'Of course. They have gone to bed, but if you will come up——'

'Not now. I have plenty of time yet. By-and-by when I am going——' She checks herself and draws her breath quickly. 'Do you know I was going to say home? I *meant* back to the Castle. What a silly mistake! But for the moment I quite forgot.'

She looks round her at the beautiful old hall with a very odd smile.

'And Billy? And the boys?' she asks at last, when her uninterrupted reverie has come to an end.

'Billy has gone to a county meeting,' says Mrs. Daryl very gently, 'and has taken Peter with him. Dick, I am afraid, is with the rabbits.'

'Ah!' says Lady Branksmere. But even as she says it she seems to have forgotten the twins, Billy and all, and lost

herself in contemplation of a more self-contained character. As if still musing she walks mechanically across the hall and into the drawing-room. Here she awakens into the present life again. The scene she now looks upon is not the one of her dreams; all is changed, and for the better, as she at once allows.

‘What a pretty room you have made of it,’ she says, turning with a faintly suppressed sigh to Mrs. Billy. ‘So different! That ghastly old furniture! I am glad you have relegated it to the celestial regions, as we used to call the garrets long ago. Or was it to the infernal ones it went? I don’t believe even cook would be glad because of it! What a room it was! And they all clung to it so! I suppose I am wanting in the finer grades of feeling, because, whenever I thought of it, it gave me a headache. Well? And so Billy is very, *very* happy? That is one of us out of the fire at all events.’ She smiles again, an indifferent little expression of goodwill that lasts just long enough to make one aware that it *was* there, but no longer.

‘Dearest Muriel! It is so good to see you again,’ exclaims Margery caressingly.

‘Is it?’ Lady Branksmere takes her sister’s hand, and pats it softly. Then all at once her glance wanders back again to Wilhelmina. ‘I may as well tell you,’ she says, ‘that I intended to take Margery to live with me at Branksmere, but now that I have seen you I know she is far better where she is.’ She looks intently at Mrs. Daryl’s bright face and says again, ‘*Far* better.’

‘She is quite happy where she is. Is it not so, Meg?’ asks Mrs. Billy, a little anxiously.

‘Entirely so,’ returns Margery hastily. In truth she would have been rather afraid to begin life afresh with Lord Branksmere, who is almost a stranger to her. Then, some sudden remorseful thought recurring to her, she slips her arm round Muriel. ‘I am without a wish now you are home again,’ she whispers tenderly.

‘Yes,’ says Lady Branksmere. She unwinds the girl’s arm very gently, and holding her hand looks at Mrs. Daryl. ‘She will be safe with you,’ she continues slowly. ‘And she can learn to love you now, as once she loved me.’

Her tone is calm to indifference, yet there is something in it that brings tears to Margery’s eyes.

‘I can love you both, darling—but you always first; you

are my sister,' she says tenderly, yet with a decisive force, for which Wilhelmina in her own honest soul honours her.

'Oh! as for me, I expect that I have done with all that sort of thing,' returns Lady Branksmere, with a curious laugh. She drops languidly into a chair and looks up at Wilhelmina. 'The comfort is to know that you are *you!*' she says. 'It makes home to them all. You get on with Billy, eh?'

Mrs. Daryl looks rather puzzled, and then a sense of amusement breaks through everything. It is a good while since she has given way to mirth of any kind, and an overpowering desire to give way to it now fills her.

'Oh! yes,' she answers meekly, her eyes on the carpet. She is battling with the wild longing for laughter that it will be such a *bêtise* to permit. It is all so intensely absurd! The idea of her *not* getting on with Billy, or he with her!

'You like being here?'

'Very much indeed. The country is so altogether lovely, and the children so pretty.'

'Ah! I see,' says Lady Branksmere, who has a little strange way of staring at people now and then, as if making up her mind about them, that is somewhat perplexing. 'One can quite understand. You are here; you pervade everything; you are, in a word, *happy*. When I ruled here, things hardly ran so smoothly.' She glances at Margery with an expression that is half careless, half wistful.

Mrs. Daryl comes to the rescue with a tender grace that sits most sweetly on her.

'All day the children talk of you and long for you,' she says; and even as she speaks—as though to corroborate her words—the door is flung violently open, and the twins rush tumultuously into the room, and precipitate themselves upon Muriel.

There is rather a paucity of garments about them, and a thorough lack of shame. They are as lively as crickets, and as full of conversation as a stream. They look triumphant, too, as though they had discovered a plot against them and had overcome it.

'It is only just this instant we heard of your coming, and when we heard it, we *ran*. Why didn't you come up to the nursery? We were wide-awake. I think, Margery,' with a withering glance at that defaulter, 'you might have *told* us, but we found it out from Nurse. Did you hear Jumper has

got a new pup? He had lots more, but that horrid Gubbins drowned all its little brothers and sisters. And how did you like being abroad? Was it nice? Was it hot? Are they all the colour of lemons? Was Rome as blue as the pictures say?’

‘Bluer,’ Lady Branksmere assures them, disengaging herself from their somewhat embarrassing embrace, and drawing them on to her knees instead. She seems more at home with the two little dishevelled lovely things in their nightgowns than she has been with what they would call the ‘grown-ups.’ ‘It was *all* blue; abominably blue,’ she goes on lightly. ‘It was hideous because of its monotony.’

‘And how is Lord Branksmere?’ asks little May prettily. As the words fall upon the air it occurs to most of those present that the child is the first, the only one, who has made a civil inquiry about Muriel’s husband.

Lady Branksmere laughs aloud, but somehow, as if impulsively, she puts the child away from her.

‘You are a courageous little mortal,’ she says. ‘You have actually summoned sufficient courage to ask after the ogre! He is quite well, thank you.’ She casts a swift glance at Margery from under her heavy lids, and seems a little amused at the hot blush that has overspread her cheeks; but in truth Margery had dreaded to drag Lord Branksmere’s name into the conversation. How would it have been received? What answer would have been given her to any polite inquiry as to his welfare?

‘This is not a visit to you—you two,’ Lady Branksmere is saying to the children. ‘To-morrow I shall make a formal call upon you, in my carriage and with my cards, and so forth, and will leave my respects, with some bonbons. Pray be careful of all! And now, considering the airiness of your draperies, I would suggest a return to the nursery and bed.’

She dismisses the children, who appear to obey her instinctively, and who are evidently much cheered by the prospect of sweetmeats on the morrow, and then turns to Margery with a half-contemptuous light in her eyes and a certain curving of her lips.

‘Lord Branksmere is quite well, I assure you; you need not have been so nervous about making your inquiries,’ she says. ‘Don’t you think you had better grasp the fact at *once*, that he is your brother-in-law?’

‘Of course—of course,’ hastily, ‘but you see he has been

so much abroad all our lives. We scarcely know him, as it were.'

'True; we scarcely know him,' repeats Lady Branksmere musingly; which remark, coming from the man's wife, rather startles Mrs. Daryl.

'The Castle has been exquisitely done up, hasn't it?' asks Margery. 'We heard so, but none of us went over to see it. Tell me, Muriel,' bending eagerly forward, 'have you seen the old woman yet? Old Lady Branksmere?'

'Ye-es. What there is of her. She is nothing but bones and two large preternaturally bright eyes. One can positively hear her rattle when she moves in bed. She is very trying,' with a distasteful shrug.

'She is a witch,' explains Margery, turning to Wilhelmina. 'Every one is afraid of her. She is about a thousand years old, and isn't thinking of dying. She is Branksmere's grandmother, and he is by no means a chicken. Oh, I beg your pardon, Muriel; I only meant——'

'Branksmere is thirty-six,' says Muriel indifferently. 'By-the-by,' looking suddenly at her sister, 'there is a Madame von Thirsk staying at the Castle—living there, in fact. It appears she has been there for years as attendant to the dowager. Ever heard of her?'

'Never,' with some surprise. 'But I suppose an elderly attendant would be little heard of.'

'Elderly! She is young, and remarkably handsome. She seems to have made herself a position there, and to have a good deal of influence. She came forward to receive me this evening on my arrival quite as if—well, as if *she* were mistress of the house, not I,' with a rather strange laugh.

Margery makes a little *moue*.

'I shouldn't like that,' she says.

'No,' returns Lady Branksmere carelessly; 'I shall get rid of her.'

She rises to her feet.

'I must be going. It grows very late.'

'But how do you mean to return?'

'As I came. I walked across the Park, and through the lower wood. No, I want nothing. I brought my maid with me, and I wish you would ring the bell and tell her to meet me at the hall-door. Ah! I knew there was something I wanted to tell you: I met Tommy Paulyn on my way through

town, and he has promised to come to me for a little while next week.'

She kisses Margery, and then Mrs. Billy, and presently is out again in the dark night. Here and there an unwilling star has forced a way into the dull vault above her, and a hot, sullen wind has arisen amongst the trees. Now and then it touches one, but for the most part it is possible to forget it. Not a sound wakes the air.

'All things are hush'd as nature's self was dead,' and only occasionally the density of the darkness is relieved by the glimmering of a white patch upon the aspens.

The wood belonging to the Manor through which she must pass on her way to the park that belongs to the Castle, is naturally well known to Lady Branksmere. Descending into a little grassy hollow, with her maid close at her heels, she comes to a standstill, and looks around her. The clouds have parted for a moment, and a watery glance from a watery moon makes the pretty hollow, that might well be termed a fairy dell, distinctly visible.

Lady Branksmere looks round her for a moment, with a sudden shrinking as though taking in each detail. Alas! how well remembered it all is—this dainty spot that once had been a daily trysting-place. She sighs heavily, and then, gathering her cloak more closely round her, as though a sudden chill has fallen on her heart, moves quickly homeward.

As she nears the Castle, a brilliant light from the drawing-room streams across the lawn almost to her feet. The windows are thrown open, in the hope perhaps that some cool air will travel inwards. Muriel dismissing her maid turns towards the veranda that is illuminated by the light, and slowly, with reluctant feet, mounts the steps that lead to it. The sound of voices reach her when she has gone half way, and when she has gained the veranda she looks curiously through the open window nearest to her into the room.

What she sees there dispels all languor!

CHAPTER VI.

I vow and protest there's more plague than pleasure with a secret.

SITTING upon an ottoman beside a remarkably handsome woman is a tall man of about thirty-six or so, dark-browed and dark-complexioned, with a firm mouth and a nondescript nose. A heavy black moustache, partially streaked with grey, falls over but hardly conceals his lips, which are in a measure thin. His jaws, clean shaven, are squared. He is not a handsome man, but a very distinguished-looking one—that something infinitely better! That he has lived all his time one may see at a glance; that he has immense self-control and great power of self-repression one reads as one runs. But, there is something about the stern face that confuses one's analysis of the soul within. A sadness, a suppression, a strain about the whole man that contrasts oddly with the coldness of his bearing, and is probably the outcome of some past and terrible grief.

The woman seated beside him, and looking into his face with a strange earnestness, is dark and slight, with glistening, melting black eyes and a lissome willowy figure. To an outsider, Madame von Thirsk, instead of a woman of thirty-five, would seem a girl of twenty-two. Lady Branksmere, regarding her from the darkened veranda, acknowledges the fact.

'Yes! It must never be betrayed; it must always rest a secret between you and me,' Madame is saying in a low agitated tone, her hand pressed upon Lord Branksmere's arm. Every word is distinctly audible to the quiet watcher without, who is standing motionless, a silent spectator of the picture before her.

'Yet'—begins Lord Branksmere, with some agitation.

'I tell you, *mon ami*, there is no "yet," no hesitation in this matter. It is between you and me. We two alone hold this sorrow. Would you be false to your oath—to *me*, after all these years?' She leans towards him.

Lady Branksmere, on the veranda without, smiles curiously, and drops her eyes.

'It would make the whole thing in a degree vulgar were I to see him kiss her,' she says to herself. 'As it is the scene is perfect. Well, I owe him little! For that, at least, I should be grateful. Now, to break up their *tête-à-tête*!'

She steps lightly into the room, and as she comes beneath the centre chandelier, throws back the lace veil from her head and looks straight at her husband.

'Where were you?' asks he quickly, rising as she enters. Some colour flames into his face.

'At home. With my people,' returns she, not curtly, or uncourteously, but coldly.

'Ah! At home?' says Madame, as if not comprehending.

'Lady Branksmere is alluding to her *old* home; to the Manor,' explains Lord Branksmere stiffly.

'Yes, to my home,' repeats Muriel smiling.

'It is strange. We thought you still here,' says Madame, smiling too.

Muriel stares at her inquiringly.

'We? Who?' demands she.

Madame grows uncomfortably red beneath the other's contemptuous gaze, and loses herself for a moment in the contemplation of her face. Then she rallies a little.

'Lord Branksmere and I,' she answers equably. Then with a sudden glance, full of seeming anxiety, 'Was it not late? Was it not cold for you, out in the open air?'

'You are very good to trouble yourself so much about me,' says Lady Branksmere, still with excessive and embarrassing civility, but without, however, making even a pretence of answering her.

'Your friends,' remarks Madame, with a sudden emphasis, 'would naturally feel some anxiety about——'

'Would they?'—Lady Branksmere interrupts her lightly. 'How do you know?' she asks with the same immovable smile. 'My *friends*,' copying the emphasis, 'are very far from this house.'

'Ah! no! You forget your husband,' Madame reminds her softly.

There is an instant's pause during which she watches intently the two before her. Lord Branksmere on the hearth-rug is staring frowningly at the wall beyond; Muriel, with a rather bored expression about her beautiful mouth, is lazily unwinding the lace that had encircled her throat. No spark of love lights either face. Madame von Thirsk, letting her heavily fringed lids droop over her eyes, permits a faint smile of satisfaction to curl her lips.

'You will excuse me,' she says gently, taking a step for-

ward, 'if I withdraw to see Madame, your grandmother, before she retires for the night.'

'Most willingly,' returns Muriel, sweetly but insolently. She acknowledges Madame's graceful salutation, and then, as if dismissing her from her thoughts as from her presence, drops languidly upon the lounge near her, and takes up one of the periodicals upon the small table at her elbow.

Lord Branksmere opens the door for Madame, and a few words pass between them on the threshold. His tone is low, but Muriel cannot fail to understand that it is apologetic. She shrugs her shoulders slightly, and turns over a leaf with a little unnecessary quickness, then the door is closed, and Branksmere coming back to the fire stands looking down at her.

'You look pale. I hope you haven't taken a chill,' he says at last, politely. 'Walking through the night air is always a little dangerous.'

'Not to me. It was a usual custom with me to go into the garden after dinner before my——when I lived at home.'

A pause.

'Don't you think you will have to do a considerable amount of explanation, now and then, if you persist in refusing to remember that *this* is now your home?' asks Branksmere with some irritation, badly suppressed.

No answer. She turns over another page and goes on reading as though he had not spoken.

'You find it dull here, no doubt.' This time the irritation is not suppressed at all.

'Here?' lifting her eyes languidly, inquiringly. 'A foolish accusation. One could hardly call a place dull on a few hours' acquaintance.'

'You could, evidently. You were hardly here *one* hour when you left it.'

'I was naturally anxious to see my brothers and sisters.'

'I had no idea,' with a slight sneer, 'that you were so devoted to your brothers and sisters.'

'It is possible that time will even further enlarge your ideas about me,' says Lady Branksmere indifferently. She leans back in her chair, and again has recourse to her magazine.

'You remember, perhaps, that we are expecting some people on Thursday?'

'Yes. People? Oh, of course; your guests you mean.'

She has roused herself with seeming difficulty from her story, and now returns to it.

'Your guests, rather.'

No answer.

'I hope, at least, you will like the selection I have made.'

'I hope so,' absently.

'Next time you can make your own.'

'I dare say.'

'I think, perhaps, it would be advisable that you should know who is coming,' says Lord Branksmere irritably.

'M——?' It is evident she is not listening.

'May I beg that you will give me your attention for a few minutes?' His tone this time is very much louder, and Lady Branksmere lifts to him a glance of calm surprise.

'Ah! you wish to talk—is that it?' she asks in a bored voice, with an air of intense resignation, laying her magazine upon her knees. 'Well?' she looks at him languidly.

'I wish certainly to interest you in the affairs of your household.'

'If that is so, you are fortunate. I am already deeply interested. I am, indeed, more than interested; I am curious. May I ask who is this woman—this housekeeper—this Madame—who has just quitted the room, and who a few hours ago welcomed me so kindly to my own house?'

'She is Madame von Thirsk. She can hardly be called a housekeeper. She is a great friend, a very tender friend, of my grandmother's.'

'A rare friendship! May and December do not, as a rule, lie in each other's bosoms. Twenty years ago Lady Branksmere must have been pretty much what she is now. Twenty years ago her *friend* must have been a little girl of twelve or so. It is very charming, very picturesque, quite a small romance. And this friend; you pay her?'

'Certainly *not*.' A dark flush rises to his forehead. 'Good Heavens! no,' he continues in a shocked tone. 'She is a very rich woman. She stays here for love of Lady Branksmere.'

'Ah! For love of Lady Branksmere! She looks well born, yet she resigns the world to take care of an old woman. It is a marvellous devotion.'

'Yes. A marvellous devotion,' repeats Branksmere in a low tone.

'She seems clever, too. Has she' (with a little sneer), 'befriended your poor grandmother long?'

'She has been with her, off and on, for the last seven years, I should say. She is quite an old friend with us all.'

'With your sister-in-law, for example?'

A shade crosses Branksmere's face: 'Of course they have met, but not often. I have been so seldom at Branksmere, and Lady Anne rarely comes here in my absence.'

'She, too, likes this Madame?'

'I really can't say,' impatiently. 'What an interest you take in her.'

'Well? Is not that what you desired a moment since, that I should look after the affairs of my household? A good wife,' with a curl of her red lips, 'should follow her husband's lead, and you—— By-the-by, you seemed quite engrossed with the conversation of your grandmother's friend as I came up the balcony steps a little while ago.'

'Did I? Probably she was telling me something about Lady Branksmere.'

Muriel throwing back her head against the soft crimson silk of the cushions laughs aloud. At this moment it occurs to her how little she really *cares*.

'You are an excellent grandson,' she says, looking at him through half-closed lids. 'Few would lose themselves so entirely as you appeared to do, in a recital of their grandmother's ailments, *even* with a handsome woman.'

'All this is beside the mark,' exclaims Branksmere abruptly. 'Why I drew you away from your book was to explain to you about our guests of Thursday next. I hope at least you will like my sister-in-law, Lady Anne.'

'You forget I have already learned to do that. Lady Anne is one of the few people I sincerely admire. She is such a distinct contrast to myself that, if only as useful study, I should value her. There seem to be no angles about her; no corners to be turned. It appears to me that in every phase of life she would be possible.'

'She is admirable always. Her girlhood, her womanhood, her widowhood, have been alike without reproach.'

'Talking of her reminds me that to-night I met some one else who is likely to suit me. I allude to my brother's wife, Mrs. Daryl. She seems a little crude, a little brusque perhaps, but *very* desirable.'

'I am glad you have found some one so much to your taste so near you—so near Branksmere.'

'Yes, it is an advantage. Well!'—carelessly—'who else are coming?'

'The Primroses, the Vyners, Mr. Halkett, Captain Staines, and——'

Lady Branksmere knocking her arm in some awkward fashion against the elbow of her chair, her magazine falls to the ground. Her husband stoops to pick it up, and as he hands it to her is a little struck by some indefinable change in her face. Are her eyes brighter, or her lips paler, or is it that—

'You look feverish. I was right about that chill after all,' he says slowly.

'If it pleases you, think so,' returns she in a quick, hard tone. 'Go on—Mr. Halkett, Captain—*Staines* did you say?'

'You should know him. He was staying down here last autumn with some people, I believe. I know little of him myself; met him in Brussels about a year ago, and yesterday, in Piccadilly, came face to face with him again. He happened to mention the Vyners, so as he is an agreeable sort of fellow—good connections and all that—I asked him to come to us for a fortnight or so. He seemed reluctant, I thought. But I suggested to him that the commencement of the season is always dull, and that a week or so in the country would regulate him for it.'

Lady Branksmere, gazing straight into the fire, with her hands tightly clasped, makes no reply to this. Her statuesque face has grown a little more immovable. Her pose is so calm that she scarcely seems to breathe. Only the rise and fall of the pearls round her white throat betoken the life within her.

When the silence has grown rather oppressive she rouses herself sufficiently to break it:

'There are others?' she asks.

'Lilian Amyot and your cousin Paulyn. You know you refused to invite any of your own friends, so I was thrown on my own resources.'

'I know that. It was an absurd time to ask any one, with the season almost begun.'

'As they *are* asked'—stiffly—'I hope you will make them welcome.'

'Even if I didn't I expect it would hardly matter in this perfectly managed *ménage*'—with a flash from her large eyes.

'This Madame de—von—whatever she is, has been at the head of your affairs for so long that it seems a pity to disturb her.'

'I fail to understand you,' haughtily. 'Madame von Thirsk has certainly been useful, but——'

'Therefore why should she not go on being useful to the end of the chapter? Why defraud yourself of her valuable services for the sake of——' She breaks off impatiently, with all the air of one who has been giving way to speech for the mere sake of filling up a void, but who is hardly aware of what she is saying: 'Why did you ask these people here?' she cries, turning now upon Branksmere with sudden passion.

'When you declined to spend your season in Park Lane I thought it prudent to fill Branksmere.'

'But why—*why*?' feverishly.

'Fearing'—dryly—'as I said before, that you would find this place dull.'

'I didn't expect to find it duller than any other place.' Her passion has died away from her, and the old insolent expression has again crept round her lips.

'Meaning it would be dull anywhere with me?'

Muriel shrugs her shoulders, but makes no reply.

'Is that your meaning?'

'Would you *compel* me to make you a rude answer?' asks she, looking full at him with a contemptuous smile. Her defiance maddens him.

'I should prefer a rude one to none at all,' he exclaims, with a sudden burst of fury. 'Your insolent silence is more than I can endure.'

'And *I* should prefer to make none,' returns she smilingly. 'How shall we decide?'

Cool and composed she rises from her seat and looks at the ormolu affair on the chimney-piece that is ticking loudly as if to warn them of the passage of time.

'Almost eleven! Too late for further discussion, however pleasant,' she says calmly. 'Good-night, my lord!'

She waits as if in anticipation of a courteous word from him, but receiving none, lifts her brows, and walks deliberately out of the room.

CHAPTER VII.

Now will I show myself to have more of the serpent than the dove.

Suspicion is a heavy armour.

'I AM sorry to have disturbed you; I believed the room empty,' says Madame von Thirsk with a little start, preparing to close the library door behind her again.

'No, stay! As you are here, perhaps you will let me consult with you about these people who are coming to-morrow.' Lord Branksmere looks up at her with a frown born of anxious thought. He pushes away from him the letter he has been writing, but on which his thoughts were hardly concentrated, being much more occupied upon a *résumé* of the last night's conversation with his wife.

'To consult with me?' says Madame, opening wide her velvety eyes. 'But, surely there is now Lady Branksmere?'

'Who knows nothing of them—whereas you have met them all before,' returns Branksmere irritably. 'To her, they will be strangers; to you, with the keen sense of analysis that belongs to you, their idiosyncrasies, their various desires, will be known, and I want them to be comfortable; to feel satisfied with the new *régime*.' He is speaking hurriedly, almost, as it seems to her, a little nervously.

'Still, it appears in a degree foolish, doesn't it?' asks she, trifling with a pretty oak ornament on the table. 'If your wife is to know these people later on, it would be better she should be made *au fait* with their dispositions as soon as possible.' She looks up suddenly. 'Where is she then? I knew she was out, but I believed you were with her.'

It is a little cruel, and Branksmere gives way before it. He flushes hotly.

'You must remember she is as yet a little new to everything,' he says, in a constrained tone. 'And it is only natural that she should want just at first to see a good deal of her own people. Let her content herself so. You can help me to-day in her absence, as you have always done.'

A quick gleam lights her eyes. She lifts them to Branksmere's face. There is in them a swift gleam of angry but tender passion that it is as well he does not see.

'As I have always done,' she repeats slowly. Then, with a change of manner swift as lightning, she flings herself into a chair, and draws towards her ink and paper.

'Now for the names of your friends,' she cries. 'You forget I don't even know so much. Lady Anne!' writing as he dictates to her—'the Vyners, Primroses, George Halkett, Mrs. Amyot, Captain St——' She drops her pen and stares up at him—'*Staines?*' she asks incredulously.

'Staines. Yes. Tall fair man in the 10th. Or was it the 10th? Do you know him?'

'Not personally. You will remember,' paling, 'how complete is my seclusion as a rule when living at Branksmere; so complete that my absences have gone unremarked. But yet, gossip reaches even the most reserved. I know something of this man.'

'Well?' He waits for a reply, but nothing comes. 'Anything bad?'

'So far; no.'

'An answer worthy of a sibyl.' He draws his chair closer to the table. A faint smile curls his lips. 'Now for your news,' he says banteringly.

'It is unimportant, *perhaps*! He was staying down here with the Blounts for a month or so last autumn.'

'*All* last autumn, as I understand, and far into the winter. But that is not a crime, is it?'

'Did I suggest crime?' The expression in her large deep eyes is curious. 'That first insinuation of it rests with *you*.' She leans towards him across the table, and with outstretched arm and fingers attracts his attention. 'Remember!' she says in a low tone.

'My dear Thekla, what? You grow tragic. You remind one of that everlasting Charles the First. And yet we were not talking of him, but of Staines and his sojourn with the Blounts last autumn.' He is a great friend of theirs.'

'Is he? He is then probably a favourite of the gods, and all men worship him. The Daryls amongst others.'

'Yes. He seemed to know everybody round here. And now that I think of it he specially mentioned the Daryls.'

'He shows talent,' says Madame von Thirsk, with a very slow smile.

'He has been unfortunate enough to anger you in some way?'

'Pardon me—we have never met. I should not know this

Monsieur——Staines, is it not? if he were shown into this room unannounced.'

'Then you are unjust to him without reason.'

'Yes. But what have I said, then?' asks she, laying her beautiful hand protestingly upon her breast with a rather foreign gesture.

'It is your manner, your whole air. As for Staines himself, I know little of him; so little that your innuendoes fall on sterile soil. When I asked him to come here he happened to mention having been here before. That is how I know of his intimacy with the Blounts.'

'Did he mention anything else? His *penchant* for Lady Branksmere amongst other things.'

She has risen to her feet and has turned a white determined face to Branksmere.

He, too, has risen.

'Was that so?' he asks in a terrible tone; and then all at once he recovers himself. He lifts his head and laughs aloud. 'Is that all?' he asks derisively—'poor devil!—why, what a mountain you would make out of your molehill!'

'Don't invite that man here, Branksmere,' says Madame, throwing out her arms as though to ward off something, and advancing a step nearer. 'Be warned in time.'

'Your warning comes too late,' lightly. 'I *have* invited him. I expect him by the five train to-morrow. Tut! you forget Muriel's beauty!' Her face pales, and her hands, still outheld, drop and clasp each other vehemently. 'Men must see it. If I were to close my doors to all who have bowed at Muriel's shrine, I expect I should know but few in the county.'

'I would not counsel you to shut your doors on those who had loved *her*,' says Madame von Thirsk in a low, meaning tone. Her eyes are lowered, her supple fingers are playing inconsequently with a paper-knife: there is something in her whole air, subtle, untranslatable, but suggestive of evil, that fires his blood.

'On whom then?' demands he fiercely.

But Madame von Thirsk seems wrapt in thoughts of her own.

'Your wife'—she continues slowly, not noticing, or else ignoring, his burst of temper—'is one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen.' She pauses here and brings her teeth together. There is a hesitation pregnant with emotion,

yet it passes; and but that it leaves her nostrils dilated, and that she drops a book she has been holding down upon the table with a gesture that is almost ungoverned, one would scarcely be aware of it.

She has grown deadly pale, but presently is calmness itself, and very nearly indifferent.

'If this man once loved her, why expose him to her fascinations for the second time?' she says, with veiled eyes and an extreme quietude of manner that should have warned him.

'It is all mere gossip,' declares Branksmere, walking impatiently up and down the room.

'It may be so: yet gossip hurts. What if this gossip you so despise had gone farther?'

'As how?' He stops short and regards her threateningly.

'What if it had been,' said she, 'that your wife—*your wife*, Branksmere!—had loved him?'

Branksmere with a sudden imprecation turns upon her.

'I warn you!' he exclaims in a voice full of concentrated passion. 'I desire you not to go too far. I will have no word breathed against Lady Branksmere!'

Madame makes a movement as if to speak, then shrugs her shoulders, and crushes the desire.

'No. Not one word,' she answers deliberately. 'It was foolish of you, my friend, to presuppose the word was there! Yet, hear me, Branksmere.' She draws nearer, and with folded arms looks gravely up at him. 'After all that has passed between us two, surely I have the right to speak one warning sentence. Take it to heart. I tell you it is *madness* to ask that man to your house.'

'A madness I refuse to recognise,' returns he coldly.

'As you will, of course. But there is much wisdom in the saying that "prevention is better than cure."'

'There is little wisdom in doubting one's wife without cause.'

Madame laughs.

'Ah! you have been too long abroad!' she says, with downcast eyes.

Lord Branksmere, going over to the window, flings it wide open. The room is growing insufferably hot.

'You would have me believe something,' he says at last in a stifled tone. 'What?'

‘I have already said as much as I intend to say. For all I know the mischief may be past and gone—and—*it may not!* If I were less your friend I should say less. But last night—something in her manner—I hardly know what—but it made me fear for you. And think,’ with a sudden flash from her dark eyes, ‘how it was she spoke of home, and where she placed it! Not here—not here, Branksmere!’

‘How you distort things!’ exclaims he; but he writhes a little beneath her words. ‘The house that has been home for the first twenty years of one’s life is naturally home to the end. In time this place too will become dear, and——’ his voice dies away. There is some melancholy in it.

‘Ah! So?’ murmurs Madame. ‘And she is there now. In the present home, eh?’

‘Yes,’ returns Branksmere shortly.

But she is not. She has come back from her morning visit to the twins, and is now making a tour of the Castle with old Mrs. Stout, the housekeeper, as cicerone. The galleries, the reception-rooms, and all the principal parts of the house are known to her of old, but with the idle curiosity of a child, she is now wandering aimlessly through the disused upper rooms, and peering idly into dainty boudoirs, and examining with a leisurely interest the spacious apartments so soon to be occupied by her unknown guests.

Mrs. Stout, who is as discursive as she is fleshy, is holding forth in a rambling fashion about all the Branksmeres dead and gone, both those under whom she has served and those defunct before her time. Her extremely engaging conversation brings them presently to the passage that leads to the apartments of the dowager. They are situated in a side wing, somewhat apart from the rest of the house, an excrescence of a later date that juts out from the northern end in a rather inconsequent way. It is a wing of large dimensions, and, as old Lady Branksmere’s rooms can be counted on two fingers, it occurs to Muriel that she would like to investigate those beyond the dowager’s domain. She makes a step, therefore, into the passage.

‘Her ladyship does not receive to-day,’ says the housekeeper, ‘but no doubt, if *you*, my lady, desire to see her, she——’

‘Not to-day,’ says Muriel. ‘But I should like to visit the rooms beyond. This part of the house looks so strange, so

mysterious, so cut off from the rest of it, that I have a strange longing to make myself acquainted with it.'

The corridor leading to Lady Branksmere's rooms is cut off from the outer gallery by a huge baize door concealed by a falling curtain of faded tapestry. Beyond these rooms lies another door also hidden by a drooping curtain. Muriel as she speaks moves towards it, and laying her hand upon the handle of the door tries to open it. It resists her efforts.

'The keys,' she says, turning rather impatiently to the housekeeper.

'I haven't them, my lady. The rooms beyond belong to Madame Thirsk. No one is ever allowed to enter them,' replies Mrs. Stout with an odd glance at her mistress, 'except Mrs. Brooks.' Mrs. Brooks is the dowager's attendant.

'But there must be six or seven rooms in this wing?' questions Muriel, colouring warmly.

'Seven, my lady.'

'Surely Madame von Thirsk does not require them all?'

'Apparently she does, my lady. I have been here now close on six years, and no one has ever gone into them save Madame herself or Mrs. Brooks. They do say as how it is haunted, but that of course is not for your ladyship to believe.' Mrs. Stout drops a respectful curtsy and a second glance at Muriel that declares her own belief in it at all events, and that she could say a good deal more on the subject if pressed.

'Haunted! By what?' asks Muriel with some faint show of interest.

'Ah! That is what no one knows, my lady. There have only been footsteps heard and—and screams at odd intervals. But the story goes that a former Lady of Branksmere flung herself from one of the windows in this part of the house, because, poor lady, she was forbidden to see her young—that is—ahem!—the gentleman she fancied,' winds up Mrs. Stout with an apologetic cough.

'Locked up by the orthodox cruel parent, no doubt?' says Lady Branksmere, with a half smile.

'Well, not exactly, ma'am. It was a cruel husband that time,' murmurs Mrs. Stout mildly.

'Husband!'

'Yes—begging your ladyship's pardon! There was a husband, sure enough, but it appears the poor creature didn't take to him much, but had a hankering like after an old lover of hers, as was most natural.'

'Take care, Mrs. Stout,' laughs Muriel carelessly—making a weak effort to smother a yawn. 'I doubt your morals are not altogether sound.'

'I think time will prove you wrong there, my lady,' returns Mrs. Stout stiffly, crossing her arms on her highly developed bosom with a primness not to be surpassed. 'Immorality has never been attributed to Jane Stout!' She sets her lips into a round O, and flickers her lids rapidly.

'No. One can quite understand that—poor Jane Stout!' returns Lady Branksmere laughing again, as she casts an amused glance at the housekeeper's full, fat face. 'But to your tale—I will not be spared one ghastly detail.'

'My lord could tell you all about it far better than I can, madam; but the end of it was that the miserable lady threw herself out of one of the windows on a starlight night, and her body was found next morning in the stone courtyard beneath, all crushed and mangled, and so disfigured that they scarcely knew her.'

'A second Jezebel,' remarks Muriel, with a faint shrug expressive of disgust. 'And now she walks the earth again, you tell me, in dainty raiment as when she lived?—or—as they picked her up from the stained courtyard?'

'Who can say, my lady?' The housekeeper shrinks a little as if terror-stricken. ''Tis only known for certain that sometimes, on moonlight nights, one can hear an unearthly yell that comes from behind this closed door. It is' (lowering her voice instinctively) 'the cry the poor soul gave when falling.'

Mrs. Stout looks fearfully over her shoulder to where the shadows are darkening the gallery outside. Muriel shudders.

'You—did *you* ever hear it?' she asks. The story has begun to have a fascination for her as strange as it is profound.

'Once, madam,' whispers the housekeeper reluctantly. 'But the dowager-lady is sometimes a little nervous, Brooks tells me, and I thought perhaps——' She pauses embarrassed.

'That the sound came from her, or else from a heated imagination,' finishes Muriel for her, smiling again. 'Well, the thought is uncanny, however it goes.'

She shakes off the gruesome feeling that had made its own of her, and once more glances at the carefully guarded door.

'I must then apply to Madame von Thirsk for the keys of this wing?' she asks slowly.

'Yes, my lady; or to his lordship.'

Muriel turns a cold face to the woman, and then as she is about to speak checks herself abruptly. There is haughty astonishment in her glance, and Mrs. Stout, who in truth had spoken without motive, grows hot and uncomfortable beneath it.

At this moment the heavy baize-covered door is flung open, and Madame von Thirsk steps softly out into the corridor!

CHAPTER VIII.

That practis'd falsehood under saintly show,
Deep malice to conceal couch'd with revenge.

Words are like leaves, and where they most abound,
Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.

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'You!' The word falls from her as though without her knowledge. Her eyes are fixed coldly upon Muriel. She is so amazed that for the moment her self-possession forsakes her, and she speaks with a total forgetfulness of the suavity so dear to her.

'Yes, it is I,' returns Muriel calmly. 'I was anxious to see this part of the house, but Mrs. Stout has told me that it is to you I must come for the keys of it.'

Mrs. Stout, with a discretion that does her credit, has dropped a curtesy and is out of sight upon the appearance of Madame.

'It is true that my rooms lie beyond here,' answers Madame now, with a little friendly nod between each word. She has quite recovered herself, and as she speaks comes a step or two nearer to Muriel, and then turning, proceeds very deliberately to lock the door behind her. The action is significant, and Lady Branksmere draws her next breath somewhat quickly.

'Your rooms? Yes,' she says, with a coolness that under the circumstances is very nearly perfect. 'I would not interfere with them as long as you remain here; but Mrs. Stout tells me there are at least seven apartments in this wing.'

'Six,' corrects Madame amiably, and with a full complement of the most charming non-comprehension.

'What I wish to see,' continues Muriel stolidly, 'are the rooms out of these six that you do not occupy. Your boudoir, your bedroom, are your own—but the others?'

'The others?' echoes Madame, with an expressive little shrug. 'Ah! You do not know, perhaps, that I do a little dilettante painting? Just quite a very little. But it is a joy to me, and I hate that the servants should meddle with my affairs, and——'

'But six rooms for painting?' interrupts Lady Branksmere, thoughtfully but ruthlessly.

'Not altogether you will understand.' Then, with graceful politeness, 'You desire the wing, perhaps? It has been, up to this, apportioned to your husband's grandmother, she being, unfortunately, attached to it for many reasons—and to me it is convenient, as being near to her, so that at any moment, night or day, I may reach her without disturbing the household; but, if you wish it'—blandly—'we can, of course, move, we——'

'I do not wish to disturb Lady Branksmere in any way,' protests Muriel haughtily, 'I merely expressed a desire to see this portion of my own house.' There is distinct expectancy in her manner, but Madame refuses to hear it.

'Ah!' she says, with an agreeable little smile, and slips the key she holds into her pocket. She lets her lashes fall over her eyes. There is something irritating in this downward glance, something baffling in the very way the meaningless monosyllable drops from her lips.

As though oppressed by the smoothness of her, Lady Branksmere throws up her head with a brusqueness foreign to her nature. But there is something healthy at least in the quick clear tones that ring through the corridor.

'It appears then that I cannot?' she says, with a pale smile.

'If, indeed, I might still consider this small portion of your house' (with a peculiar bow) 'as belonging to me and my patient, Lady Branksmere, I should be grateful,' returns Madame meekly. Her eyes are still lowered. With one small shapely brown hand she smooths down a rebellious bit of the costly lace that throws out the colour of her gown.

Lady Branksmere, conquered for the moment, angry but speechless, makes her a slight inclination that is imperious

enough to emanate from a sovereign to a subject, and turns away. But in a moment returns:

'You say the servants are forbidden to enter your rooms,' she says, looking straight at Madame; 'no one then has access there save you?'

'And Mrs. Brooks. She it is' (pointedly) 'who summons me at night to the bedside of—my patient—when my presence there is necessary, which' (with slow force) 'is very frequently.'

'Mrs. Brooks only?'

'I have said,' returns Madame decisively.

'So?' says Lady Branksmere with extreme contempt. 'It seems a pity, Madame, you will permit no one to see these paintings of yours, which, I am sure, are well worth a visit!'

She turns away with an insolent air, and goes down the gallery with her usual slow and stately step.

But her heart is beating wildly, and a sense of defeat is maddening her. Oh, how to get rid of this woman! It is the one thought that fills her; that torments her. It seems it will be a more difficult matter than she first dreamed of to turn her adrift. Her mind runs swiftly to old Lady Branksmere—that aged, infirm creature, whose sole comfort lies in the ministrations of this foreign friend. By what right could she deprive this helpless, stricken being of her last joy? How reconcile it to her conscience? Yet that woman's insolence! The *insolence* of her! She stops short when she has turned a corner, and is out of sight of her foe, and clenches her hands with uncontrollable passion. Her face flames and then grows deadly pale. The keys! She, the mistress, is to demand them prettily from her, or from his lordship!

Suddenly all the passion dies from her face. She grows singularly calm. But her lips as she moves onward seem to have taken a hard, stern, determined line.

From the south gallery comes the sound of many voices and much laughter, and the welcome clatter of cups and saucers; the breath of innumerable roses, mingled with the fragrant odour of the steaming tea, floats on the air. The servants by mutual consent have been relegated to limbo, and the men are having a somewhat busy time of it carrying the little dainty Wedgwood cups, and their gaudier sisters of Crown Derby to and fro, whilst paying a gentle attention to

the delicate hot cakes that are calling aloud for notice from their gleaming tripods.

A huge fire of pine-logs lying on the open hearth is roaring, crackling in a jolly, inconsequent fashion, its flames lighting up and bringing into prominence the exquisite old chimney-piece of carved and blackened oak that rises to the ceiling. In the deep-cushioned recesses of the windows tall palms and feathery ferns are flourishing in monster pots of Oriental ware, and well in the distance a stand of glorious daffodils and narcissi are sending forth a subtle perfume.

A tall lean old wolf-hound is walking majestically up and down amongst the assembled guests—from the gaudy screens that cut off draughts from the lower end of the gallery, to the dim tapestry hangings that ornament the other end—taking with a deep solemnity as his just due the pats and pretty words that greet him as he goes.

The walls are sparsely studded with priceless plates of hideous colours and designs, and on a large black rug a little sleepy puss is snoring blissfully. Taken as a whole it is a charming picture, and Lady Branksmere, standing on the Persian mat before the fire, in a tea-gown of ancient brocade, completes it.

She is talking to old Lady Primrose—a placid person with corkscrew ringlets and a desirable son—and is smiling kindly. She is looking pale and slender and extremely beautiful. The intense hues of the brocade throw out her pallor and heighten the brilliance of her large eyes. She is giving her whole mind apparently to her conversation with the old lady, who has passed the bounds of hearing, and has to be paid severe attention if you wish her to know what you are at. Muriel's clear, distinct tones suit her admirably, and almost awake within her breast the delusion that her ears are as satisfactory as those of most people.

Everybody is talking more or less, and the soft hubbub caused by the voices grows drowsy. Somebody at the upper end of the gallery is playing the piano very delicately—almost in a whisper as it were—a fair woman of about thirty-three with a charming face and a quantity of loosely-dressed golden hair. Besides letting her fingers wander tenderly over the notes, she is conversing in an undertone with a little man of a rather comical exterior, who is bending over her. This is Lord Primrose; who if Nature had endowed him with corkscrew ringlets would have been the image of his mother. As

she gets deeper into her subject with him, the music, perhaps in accordance with her thoughts, grows slower and slower until at last it reaches an andante pitch.

'Lady Anne! Lady Anne!' calls a tall, ugly man with a clever face, 'is the time, the place, the hour, nothing to you? Your music is always the best—but—I leave it to you! Should one play a funeral march amidst the fleshpots of Egypt?'

'Ah! pardon, pardon!' laughs Lady Anne, shrugging her handsome shoulders. 'But then you must remember, Mr. Halkett, I was not playing to you—but to Lord Primrose. He likes dismal things.'

'How we go astray! I quite thought he liked you,' says the ugly young man.

'Growing up amongst us——' begins a loud voice that strikes every one dumb for a moment. It emanates from a short, stout person in a bonnet of shape indescribable. It comes, indeed, from Miss Mumm, the Daryls' Aunt Selina.

'Good Heavens! I quite thought it was a dynamite explosion,' whispers the Hon. Mrs. Vyner, in her usual affected lisp. 'What a cruel voice! And what is growing up among us? Is it Primrose?'

'Not at all. She is alluding to herself. She is quite a young thing yet,' says Mr. Halkett.

'Sh! Let her explain. She is going on with it,' murmurs Mrs. Amyot, holding up a warning finger.

'Growing up among us,' continues Miss Mumm, in her loud rasping tones, 'is a most reprehensible and detestable——er——'

'Person!' suggests Mr. Halkett considerably.

'No, sir! *habit*. A most reprehensible habit of dragging into frivolous and idiotic conversation extracts from Holy Writ. Such a practice cannot be too heavily censured. The fleshpots of Egypt have just been alluded to. Does anybody know where they are first mentioned? Are such things to be lightly spoken of? We know'—with a severe glance at Halkett—'who it is who quotes Scripture for his own ends.'

Everybody is, of course, delighted.

'There!' says Margery Daryl, who, in a big hat and white gown, is looking as pretty as possible. 'You see what Aunt Selina has called *you*!'

'You mustn't condemn us all as frivolous, dear Miss Mumm,' Mrs. Amyot is saying, in her sweetest way. She is

a pretty little widow, with dark eyes and amber hair and the reputation of being a little—well, just a *little*—— ‘I, as you may possibly know, am always regarded as quite a model, and there is your niece, Lady Branksmere, for example, eh?’

‘Yes, Muriel is quite all I can desire,’ says the spinster magisterially. ‘She is my idea of what a properly-conducted young married woman should be. There are no whisperings in corners here. No runnings up the stairs and lingering in corridors; no vulgar clasping of hands beneath the cover of the table-cloth, as I regret to say is the low practice of some young married folk. Muriel is dignified. I could hardly fancy a situation in which she would fail to comport herself with becoming grace.’

At this moment a servant throws wide the tapestry hangings at the end of the gallery and announces—

‘Captain Staines!’

CHAPTER IX.

Suspicion sleeps at wisdom's gate.

Knowledge is power.

INVOLUNTARILY Lord Branksmere lifts his eyes and turns them upon his wife.

‘I hope Jenkins was in time to meet your train? He started rather late,’ says Lady Branksmere, advancing so very indolently to welcome the new-comer that as his hand touches hers she is still on the border of the Persian rug. Her voice is cold and firm as usual, her colour unchanged. Not so much as a flicker of her long heavy lashes betrays the fact that she remembers that this man standing now before her—with a stoicism scarcely so perfect as her own—was her chosen lover only three short months ago! Her unconcern is so complete, so utterly without effort (apparently), that Branksmere draws a breath of passionate relief. He had almost forgotten where he was in his eager examination of his wife's features, until startled into remembrance by a whisper at his side.

It is scarcely a whisper either, rather a word or two spoken

involuntarily. Madame von Thirsk, standing beside him, with her lithe form rather bent forward, is also watching Muriel's reception of Captain Staines with an intensity of expression that surprises Branksmere. As Muriel's cold, measured tones meet her ear she draws a breath of admiration.

'Magnificent!' she says, in the subdued voice that had startled him.

'What?' he asks sharply, turning abruptly to her. She colours faintly, and then shrugs her shoulders.

'That old brocade,' with a little supercilious glance at Muriel's toilette, and an ambiguous smile. She moves away from him with lowered eyes to where Mrs. Daryl is standing in one of the windows.

'I say,' says Mrs. Amyot, 'that is Captain Staines, isn't it? Some little story about him, wasn't there?'

'I never heard it amounted to that,' drawls Mrs. Vyner. 'He was very decidedly *épris* with her before her marriage, but——'

'With whom?'

'Lady Branksmere, of course. Why, what were you alluding to?'

'Ah? so! Hadn't a notion of such an affair as *that*. But really one never knows what those immaculate-looking women are going to be up to next. In love with him before marriage, you say. And now she has him here?'

'By Branksmere's desire, not hers. It was Branksmere himself who specially invited him.'

'Ah! now, that was kind!' exclaims Mrs. Amyot, breaking into an irrepressible little laugh.

'What's the joke?' asks Halkett, dropping into the chair nearest to her—as a rule he is always just there. 'Anything I may hear without detriment to my morals?'

'One knows so little about *them*,' hesitates Mrs. Amyot.

'They are unobtrusive, certainly. I don't show them off like Miss Mumm. You must take them for granted.'

'I shouldn't like to take them at all,' lisps Mrs. Vyner, unfurling her fan.

'I shall tell Colonel Vyner about your incivility to me,' says Halkett, 'if you persist in this persecution of an unprotected young man. By-the-by, is he here?'

'He is always *en évidence*. One cannot escape him,' says Colonel Vyner's wife, with a soft grimace.

‘Well, I still want to hear about what was amusing you so intensely a moment since,’ persists Halkett, looking at Mrs. Amyot. ‘If I may without blushing.’

‘That, certainly,’ casting a coquettish glance at him from under her exquisitely fringed lids. ‘That pretty accomplishment has been forgotten by you for many a day. Mrs. Vyner and I were merely discussing the amiability of the present age!’ Here she leans a little towards her friend.

‘*My* little story was not *yours*,’ she continues confidentially. ‘Sentiment had nothing to do with it. It was something else. Gambling debts, a row of some sort in some club abroad. To tell you a truth, I am always rather vague about my little stories unless the subjects of them happen to be——’

‘Your intimate friends,’ interposes Halkett gaily.

‘Ah! make it acquaintances. It sounds better,’ returns Mrs. Amyot composedly.

‘Talking of them,’ yawns Mrs. Vyner, ‘did you ever see any one wear like Madame von Thirsk? How she chooses her gowns! It’s talent—positive talent! Thirty if a day, and doesn’t look twenty-two. I hope when I’m thirty I’ll look half as well.’

‘When will that be?’ asks Mrs. Amyot mischievously.

‘Never!’ calmly. ‘I have made up my mind to go from twenty-eight to fifty in a week. But pay attention to Madame. She is worth it.’

‘She is very careful, certainly, and she is foreign. The latter counts a great deal.’

‘I think it is all in those dear little soft high frills she wears round her throat,’ says Mrs. Amyot reflectively. ‘Nothing betrays one like the throat. But I don’t admire her as much as you do. There is a sly, *catty* look about her that annoys me. If I were Lady Branksmere——’

‘Well?’

‘I should give her her walking papers straight off.’

‘You should remember how good she has been to Branksmere all these years—or at least to his grandmother,’ murmurs Mrs. Vyner demurely. ‘And then—he has asked Captain Staines to his house. There is such a thing as gratitude.’

‘Oh! Branksmere’s all right,’ says Halkett suddenly. ‘And Lady Branksmere——’

‘Is handsome enough to upset all our apple-carts,’ laughs

Mrs. Amyot. 'Therefore, we owe her one. But, Captain Staines! He wouldn't suit *me* at all events.'

'I wonder who would?' asks Halkett carelessly, darting a swift glance at her.

'You do admirably,' retorts she saucily. The answer is so unexpected that the three burst out laughing.

'No—no more tea, thank you, Mr. Bellew,' says Mrs. Amyot, looking up at Curzon. 'But you can give me something else—information about that little woman in the window talking to Madame.'

'That is Mrs. Daryl. A new-comer altogether. She married Billy Daryl lately, or he married her, I'm not sure which. Anything else I can do for you?'

'Yes. Go back to Margery,' with a smile. 'So,' turning to Lord Primrose, who has just joined them, 'that is Mrs. Daryl? Big heiress, wasn't she?'

'Yes. She was the only child of her father, and he was a rag and bone merchant.'

'Not at all,' corrects Mrs. Vyner languidly. 'Three lovely golden balls hung before his door, and——'

'She didn't get a penny from her father,' interrupts Halkett. 'There was an old General something or other, an uncle of hers, who enriched her. She was in America for the best part of her young life, then came back to England, and was companion to two crotchety old cousins, whom the gods (as they boast so much of their justice) should confound, and then Billy looked her up, and then the General evaporated, leaving his winnings behind him, and—that's all. You'll like her. She's real grit, as they say in her early home.'

'Strangers are often interesting. I shall make myself pretty to her,' says Mrs. Amyot. 'By-the-by, she appears to know Captain Staines, at all events!'

Muriel's chilling reception of him had somewhat disconcerted Captain Staines on his first entry. He had closed his interview with her as speedily as possible, and wandered away aimlessly through the gallery, stopping now and then to say a word or two to those he knew. A large part of the county had by chance chosen to-day to call upon the bride, so that the place was rather full, the guests staying in the house not being inconsiderable in themselves. Staines, walking through them with his tall, upright figure and handsome face, is distinctly noticeable. He is a fair man, with a long, drooping moustache, and straight nose, and large, but rather light,

blue eyes. There is a little scar upon his left temple that rather adds to than detracts from his appearance. Beyond all doubt he is a man worthy a second glance, and yet there is something about his face that, to the thoughtful few, gives ground for speculation. Is it that the brilliant eyes are too closely set, or perhaps a little shifty, or is it that there is a touch of cruelty in the well-formed mouth?

With some people, at all events, it appears he is hardly a favourite; Colonel Vyner receives his advances but coldly, and Lord Primrose grows even more devoted to Lady Anne as he draws near. Lady Anne herself is very gracious, but then—*could* she be otherwise? Old Sir Stapleton Gore, too, is very amiable to him, and Billy Daryl accepts him with effusion. Billy had seen a good deal of him last autumn, and now, under the impression that his sister, Lady Branksmere, had not behaved altogether well to him in throwing him over for a better *parti*, feels it incumbent upon him to be specially civil.

Staines, turning suddenly round, finds himself face to face with Mrs. Daryl.

To a thoughtful observer it might suggest itself that when he so finds himself he would gladly (for the time being at least) be blotted out of remembrance. His pale skin grows paler, and he so far forgets his usually perfect manners as to omit to take the hand she holds out to him. After an instant's hesitation,

'This is a surprise, is it not?' smiles she calmly. 'But I should have given you credit for being proof against all casualties of such a nature. It is the unexpected that always happens. Have you never yet learned that?'

'Willy——' begins he confusedly.

'Mrs. Daryl——' interrupts she icily, and turns away.

'I beg your pardon,' exclaims he, following her farther into the window recess. 'I know nothing, remember that. You are married then? and to Daryl? By Jove! You—you are Lady Branksmere's sister-in-law!'

'Yes. Why should that fact cause you emotion?' asks she contemptuously, looking at his flushed face and compressed lips.

'It doesn't,' returns he, making an effort at composure.

'Is that so? Then why have you grown so red?' demands Mrs. Daryl, in her terribly straightforward way. 'Look here, my friend! If you have come down here with the

intention of making it unpleasant for anybody, I'd advise you to chuck up that intention as speedily as possible. *I'm here, too!*'

'I don't see why you should attack me like this,' says Staines sulkily. Then suddenly he lifts his head and looks at her: 'Can't we be friends?' asks he.

'Friends? No!'

'Not foes, at least?'

She is silent.

'Betrayal will cost *you* dearer than *me*,' says Staines, in a low, deliberate tone.

'I think not,' slowly. Then she looks at him. '*Coward!*' she says scornfully.

'A woman's good name is a brittle thing. A touch smashes it.'

'Yet, I am not afraid. You will never be able to smash mine; whereas you will recall, perhaps, that little affair with Grévecœur and——'

Staines grows livid.

'Ha!' laughs she lightly. 'That touches you, it seems. Take heart. I am not going to set the social bloodhounds on your track—*yet*.'

'Sign a truce with me then,' exclaims he eagerly.

'To be kept sacred just so long as I see you conducting yourself properly,' returns she meaningly. 'Now go. The very sight of you is hateful to me.'

She seems to breathe more freely when he has left her, and turns with a glad smile to Margery who draws near with Curzon Bellew at her side. The girl is looking singularly pretty to-day, though perhaps a little petulant—as she generally does when Bellew is with her—but charming all the same, with her dainty oval face, and saucy lips, and eyes most wonderful—laughing, roguish, wicked, tender, cruel eyes—guarded jealously by their long curved lashes.

Just now she is looking a little worried, but Mrs. Daryl is not allowed time to inquire into the matter. Lady Branksmere, sweeping up to them, lays her hand on Wilhelmina's arm.

'I want to introduce you to Lady Anne,' she says in the softly imperious way that belongs to her and suits her. Mrs. Daryl follows her. Half-way across the gallery Muriel looks round.

'So you know Captain Staines?' she says.

'Slightly, yes. I met him abroad, in Brussels, where the old people went once and took me with them.'

Then Lady Anne is reached and the introduction is gone through.

Meantime Margery has sunk in a rather dejected fashion upon the deep window seat, and is gazing out upon the wooded hill steeped in dying sunshine, and on the lake far down below that is sparkling as if incandescent.

'You didn't mean it really, did you?' asks Bellew presently.

'That I am not going to the county ball, next Thursday fortnight? Certainly I meant it. Why should you doubt me?'

'But your reason?'

'Reasons rather, for they are "plentiful as blackberries." But why should I give them?'

'Give one at least,' pleads he.

'Take the principal one then. I haven't a gown fit to be seen in.'

'Oh! stuff and nonsense,' says Mr. Bellew, with quite a superior air.

'I dare say!' indignantly. 'That is just the brilliant remark one might expect you to make. But there is very little nonsense about it, let me tell you, and no stuff at all—not a *yard* of it—or probably I'd go. But to appear shabbily gowned is a thing I will not do. If I did,' with a withering and most uncalled-for glance at her slave, '*you* would be the very first to find fault with me.'

'I would?'

'Yes, you. Picture me to yourself in that heirloom of mine—the old white silk.'

'You look lovely in it——'

'Amongst all the others tricked out in their best bibs and tuckers straight from White and Worth, and confess you would be ashamed of me.'

'Ashamed!'

'Yes, thoroughly,' with decision. 'You needn't imagine that you are a bit better than the rest of you, and all men hate a dowdy woman.'

'I don't see what that's got to do with you.'

'Mrs. Amyot has been teaching you to make pretty speeches.'

'She has done nothing of the sort. I expect,' indignantly, 'she has something better to do.'

'Well! you needn't lose your temper about it. If,' provokingly, and with a side glance at him from under her long lashes, 'you are in love with her I see nothing to be concealed.'

'I haven't lost my temper about anything,' angrily, 'and I'm not in love with——'

'*Anybody!* Sensible boy!' interrupts Miss Daryl gaily. 'Keep to that till your hair is grey, and you'll die a happy old man. No! Not another word about this odious ball. I'm not going, because I haven't a respectable rag to put on, and there's an end of it. The humiliating truth has been laid bare to you. Respect it, and help me to forget all about it.'

An expression that is distinctly miserable clouds Mr. Bellew's face.

'I wish——' he begins with a rush, and then comes to a dead pause.

'So do I, for lots of things,' agreeably.

'It was hardly that I was going to say. What I mean to say is '—colouring warmly—'that if I could only have my own way——' Another eloquent hesitation.

'You would probably be the most wretched person upon earth. Have you never yet grasped that pleasing truth? Have you never read any of the highly improving, if slightly bilious tracts that Mr. Goldie distributes to the young people of the parish every Sunday? Oh, Curzon! I doubt you aren't all you ought to be!'

'Look here,' says Mr. Bellew desperately, who hasn't heard a word of the foregoing denunciation, 'all that *I* want is—to give you all that *you* want.'

'Now, that is what I call true amiability,' says Margery. 'Mr. Goldie will be proud of you yet. To give me all that I want? As, for example?'

'A new gown for this ball!' blurts out he miserably, and then looks ready to faint with fright.

Margery has turned aside. The heavy amber satin curtains conceal her effectually from the sight of all but him, and therefore she covers her face with both her hands, in peace. Her head is bent. She is trembling!

Mr. Bellew's soul dies within him. Is she angry—hopelessly offended, perhaps? What the deuce made him say

that? What imp of darkness persuaded him to offer her such an insult? She'll never forgive it! It's—it's just the sort of thing that—er—perhaps a woman *wouldn't* forgive! Oh! if she would only say something! A jolly good rowing would be a matter for gratitude compared with this.

The silence is growing intolerable. Curzon having made up his mind to break it at all hazards, looks at her nervously, and as he does so a certain little motion of her shoulders becomes known to him. Is she crying? He grows cold with apprehension. He has, then, not only offended but hurt her!

'Meg!' exclaims he, softly but vehemently, 'let me explain. You are awfully angry, I can see, but if you knew the truth—if you could see into my heart! Turn round, can't you, and listen to me?'

But Miss Daryl plainly declines either to turn round or listen. That mournful motion of her pretty shoulders grows stronger, more pronounced. She is evidently convulsed with grief. What on earth is to become of him if she won't even hear his apology?

'You *will* listen, won't you?' stammers he wretchedly. 'I'm the unluckiest beggar alive, I do believe, but in this affair I am innocent.'

No answer.

'My dear girl, you *must* believe me.'

Not a word. Gracious powers! What is he to do next?

'If you go on crying like that,' declares he desperately, 'you will drive me out of my mind. Even if I had meant it, you couldn't take it worse, but I *didn't*!' He throws out his hands in frantic protest. 'Pon my soul I didn't! There! the words slipped out somehow, but I meant nothing. I *swear* it!'

Miss Daryl, as though roused to life by this passionate declaration, turns slowly round and surveys him through half-open fingers that are slender and pale and pink-tipped—the most kissable fingers ever created, according to her adorers.

'Well, of all the mean speeches!' she says deliberately. She is flushed, but not with grief; her eyes are all alight, her lovely lips parted; she is evidently consumed with laughter. 'Then you won't give me that gown after all?' she goes on. 'And when you had *promised* it too? Oh, Curzon! I wouldn't have believed it of you. Was there ever so disgraceful a transaction since the world began!'

'Margery,' cries he rapturously, 'what an abominable little actress you are! What a fright you gave me. You know very well——'

'You—at last! Yes, down to the ground,' wrinkling up her brows, and glancing at him with would-be reproach. 'Well! Keep your paltry gown. It is not the first time I have been deceived in you.'

'You will let me help you then?'

'Not now, certainly. Not after the base way in which you have gone back on your offer. Oh, fie! Mr. Bellew! It is my turn now to be ashamed of you.'

'But will you?' entreats he, pressing the point.

Margery breaks into low, soft laughter.

'No; not I. Don't be a goose,' she says lightly, patting the back of one of his hands in a surreptitious amused sort of way. 'I think I see myself taking clothes from you.'

To say that Mr. Bellew is disappointed by the answer would be to say nothing.

'It is all such humbug,' he declares gloomily. 'Why should a girl take a bracelet from a fellow and not a gown? The bracelet would cost twice as much. And—and if we were married you would take anything from me. Why should a few words make such a difference?'

'A few words very frequently create serious differences between people.'

'You don't follow me. I was wondering why the words of the marriage service read over a woman should make her on the instant change all her views.'

'I don't follow you there, certainly. I don't believe if you were to read the marriage service over my head every day for a week it would make me change my opinion of—Mrs. Amyot, for example.'

'I wonder if I shall ever hear that service read over you.'

'Well, I hope so.'

'Margery'—rising to the topmost pinnacle of hope—'do you mean it?'

'Why not?' asks Miss Daryl laughing. 'Did you think I had vowed myself to a life of celibacy?'

'Ah!' says he, rather crushed by her gaiety, 'I see. I didn't understand. I wonder,' gazing at her anxiously, 'if you will ever marry me?'

'So do I!' returns Miss Daryl with undiminished cheer-

fulness. 'The question leaves a good field for interesting speculation.'

Bellew at this abominable speech instantly changes his expression for a wrath that knows no bounds.

'Don't worry yourself over it,' he says. 'It is no such great matter after all. If not me, another; and if not another, someone else.'

'That is a very remarkable speech.'

'And you are in a very remarkable humour, it strikes me. What have I done to you that you should treat me like this?'

'Like what?'

'First you refuse to go to this ball—simply, I honestly believe, because I happened to mention it to you, and you saw my heart was set upon your being there. Had Primrose asked you I expect your reply would have been Yes, not No.'

'To be Lady Primrose, do you mean?'

'That will come later on, no doubt. Just at present I was alluding to the county ball.'

'How do you know he *didn't* ask me to go?'

'Because you are not going. By-the-by, what was he talking to you about for the last hour?'

'Of love!' sweetly.

'What?'

'Love,' with gentle reiteration. 'Pure and simple. Platonic love, you will understand.'

'I do,' grimly.

'I thought he viewed the subject rather abstrusely, and I told him so; but he was very well up in it nevertheless, and very interesting too.'

'No doubt. I fear I have been boring you all this time,' with elaborate politeness. 'Let me take you back to the others.'

'I haven't feared boring you,' says Miss Daryl, 'because ——' she puts back one of the satin curtains delicately and glances down the gallery. 'Yes, I knew it,' she goes on pleasantly, 'she is still occupying herself very amiably with Mr. Halkett, so that you would have been rather out of it, even if you weren't wasting your time with me. There is trumpery, you know.'

This allusion to Mrs. Amyot and his supposed *penchant* for her is treated by Bellew with the supreme disdain it merits.

'However, if you are tired of being here, and would like to try your luck with her again, go,' says Margery.

Rather to her astonishment he takes her at her word, and moves towards the opening of the curtains.

'And—Curzon——' she calls to him just as he is disappearing through them. He turns upon her a smileless face and a lowering brow.

'Well?'

'There is just one other thing,' letting her pretty head droop a little, and plucking with adorable affectation of nervousness at the blood-red flowers in her hand. 'If there is any dancing by-and-by, will you ask *me* to dance before you ask —Mrs. Amyot?'

She lifts her head and treats him to a very lovely glance. It is timorously hopeful, and is, therefore, distinctly hypocritical—because, as she well knows, she needn't hope at all. All that sort of thing is done to overflowing by *him*. She lets her large eyes dwell on his with mournful entreaty that 'some other time, some other day,' would have excited only laughter in his breast, but just now incenses him. She is looking a great deal too meek, and

on her mouth
A doubtful smile dwells like a clouded moon
In a still water.

'Pshaw!' exclaims he scornfully, turning on his heel and striding down the gallery.

Miss Daryl gives way to soft laughter.

'I hope it will be a waltz the first,' she soliloquizes contentedly. 'Not one of them can dance as well as he does.'

CHAPTER X.

The past is in many things the foe of mankind. . . .
For the past has no hope.

MRS. AMYOT, when the idea of dancing through the afternoon is propounded to her, is delighted with it; so is Mrs. Vyner in her languid fashion. So indeed is everybody except Aunt Selina! That sour spinster sitting on the one hard, uncomfortable chair the gallery contains—a chair never intended for use, being severely ornamental—looks frowningly around her,

and waits for the luckless pause that may give her the opportunity of expressing aloud her disapprobation of the amusement in view.

Halkett, who from the beginning of their acquaintance, has been greatly taken by her, now approaches her with a winning smile.

'You dance, of course, Miss Mumm?' he says, with beaming artlessness. 'May I have——'

'Dance? No!' interrupts Miss Mumm, adjusting her *pince-nez* with an air of stern displeasure. 'I should think not, indeed. I wouldn't be guilty of such lightness.' She is sixty if a day, and on an average weighs about seventeen stone.

'No, no,' says Mr. Halkett soothingly. 'Your actions, I feel sure, are not open to censure of that sort. Whatever you are'—with profound and respectful conviction—'I am sure you are not light.'

'It is a comfort to know, that you, sir, at least, have measured me justly,' returns Aunt Selina gravely. 'In my time, that abominable romp called dancing was looked upon as little less than sin. Decently-minded people never countenanced it. We were content with more innocent amusements, such as, for instance, "Puss in the corner," "Blind-man's buff," "Kiss in the ring," "Hunt the slipper," and a variety of other simple sports.'

Mrs. Amyot and Primrose—who happen to be standing near—give way to wild mirth, in which Curzon, after a faint struggle, joins heartily. Mr. Halkett, however, seems much struck with Miss Mumm's remarks.

'There is a great deal in what you say,' he agrees solemnly, 'a great deal. We might all take it to heart with much benefit to ourselves. There are possibilities about "Kiss in the ring" before which the weaker attractions of dancing pale. And as for "Hunt the slipper," why should we not hunt it now? Mrs. Amyot, will you join me in the chase? Miss Mumm, I feel sure, will kindly give us the rules.'

'You all sit down on the ground,' begins Aunt Selina carefully, 'and make a circle.'

'A mystic circle!'

'If anybody is going to make anything go round and round I won't play,' declares Primrose. 'I've had enough of that sort of thing in town. It makes me giddy, for one thing, and I can't endure spirits. They play the very mischief with one's nerves.'

'If taken to excess,' assents Halkett gravely

'One should throw a little spirit into everything one undertakes,' puts in Mrs. Amyot, who has not been listening.

'But there won't be any in this game at all, nothing bordering on it, will there, Miss Mumm? Not so much as a bottle of the harmless, if slightly trying, ginger beer.'

'Eh?' questions the spinster, who is a little out of it by this time.

'Lord Primrose,' says Halkett mildly, 'is afraid you will intoxicate him.'

'Don't mind him, Miss Mumm,' interposes Primrose. 'Nothing of the sort, give you my word. Was alluding merely to that horrid juggling system they are carrying on now of showing up one's grandmother after she has lain quiet in her grave for half a century.'

'What are you going to do? To dance?' asks Lady Branksmere, coming up to the group.

'Well, that is what we should like to do,' answers Mrs. Vyner pathetically. 'But Miss Mumm has terrified us all. She says,' demurely, 'it is very wicked of us even to long for such a godless amusement. She has taken hold of Mr. Halkett's conscience and converted him, and now we don't know what to do.'

'Is he the keeper of all your consciences?' asks Muriel, with her low *trainante* laugh. 'Poor Mr. Halkett!' She lets her glance fall suddenly on her aunt, who is looking grimly from one to the other. 'I hope, Aunt Selina,' she says with cold meaning, 'that you will try to reconcile yourself to our little immoralities.'

'No, Muriel! I shall *not*,' returns Miss Mumm austere, rising from her seat. 'I shall never permit myself to grow lukewarm in a good cause. I have my principles, and I shall stick to them, whatever may be the consequences. Good evening, my dear! I shall not stay to countenance the vulgar exhibition you and your friends are about to make of yourselves. I shall avoid even the very appearance of evil.'

Muriel shrugs her shoulders.

'I am disappointed in you,' continues the spinster. Lady Branksmere unfurls her fan and sighs profoundly. In truth, she is feeling bored to the last degree. 'I conceive it will be my duty to invite you and your friends to Barren Court in a day or two, and hope you will all come to us. That is, to me and Sir Mutius'—looking ungraciously around.

'We shall be charmed,' says Muriel languidly.

'You will find it dull!' remarks Miss Mumm severely. 'Let that be understood. Dull, but,' with withering force, '*decent!*'

Without further ado, she takes herself off, and a universal peal of laughter follows on the last echo of her footsteps.

'Anne, will you sing us something whilst they are arranging the things—putting the footstools to one side?' asks Muriel.

Lady Anne Branksmere, who is never happier than when her fingers are on the keys, moves briskly to the piano.

'She sings?' asked Mrs. Vynner vaguely.

'Oh, charmingly. Not magnificently or loudly, you know; but with feeling and all that sort of thing,' says Primrose. 'Tell you a fellow who sings well, too. Staines. Like a bird he sings. Very hard to make him warble. I expect he thinks it wise to make himself rather scarce in that way. Adds to his popularity—see?'

'He would want to add something to it; by all accounts, it is thin!' whispers Mrs. Amyot.

'Eh? Can't say, I'm sure,' says Lord Primrose, rather puzzled, to whom Staines is more or less a stranger. 'Thought he was rather a fancy article, run after a good deal and that, eh?'

Meantime Lady Anne's exquisite notes are falling on the air. It is a little Neapolitan song she sings, soft, low, gay; and it sets the pulses laughing even before one gets to the end of it. Every one is very effusive when she rises from the piano, and compliments, sincere as they are pretty, are banded to and fro.

'Captain Staines, will you sing to us now?' says Mrs. Amyot suddenly, who had been dying to make him sing ever since Primrose had told her he was chary of giving his voice to the world.

'I think not,' returns Staines, smiling at her. 'My efforts would hardly please you, I imagine, after what we have just heard, and besides——'

He pauses, and the smile dies from his lips, which have grown grave and thoughtful.

'Besides what?'

'Simply that I believe I have forgotten how, that's all. I had almost forgotten that I once used to sing until—to-day.'

His voice has sunk a little, Muriel who is standing near looks quickly at him.

'Let to-day then be the commencement of a new epoch in your life's history,' persists Mrs. Amyot gaily. 'Return to your old delights. Give place to song.'

'To go back upon our lives is denied us,' says Captain Staines gently. 'And to most of us the past is a sealed book to which we dare not revert. I am sorry I cannot please you in this matter, but,' he turns his gaze suddenly upon Lady Branksmere, and his eyes seem to burn into hers and compel her regard in return, 'music has died within me.'

'Through dearth of encouragement, perhaps,' says Lady Branksmere coldly, reluctantly, and as one driven to speech against her will by the steady glance of his eyes. 'If you were to try—to make an effort—to recover your lost power, perhaps you might succeed.'

'My lost power!' repeats he in a peculiar tone. He looks down, and then continues softly, 'Well, I will try, if that is your desire.'

'Not mine—Mrs. Amyot's,' says Lady Branksmere haughtily, with subdued but imperious anger in her tone.

'Oh, yes, mine certainly!' laughs Mrs. Amyot joyously.

The group at the piano divide and make room for him; and presently his fingers, with an uncertainty that is rich in promise, travel over the notes, striking a chord here and there, until at last the spirit moves him as it were and he bursts into song.

His voice is not powerful, but clear and elastic, and for exquisite *timbre* could hardly be equalled. The words fall from him with a curious distinctness, and there is something about his whole style so *sympathique* that it touches one, and holds one spell-bound. He sings too with a zest, a *brio*, that startles even as it charms and creates the longing for more—

Est-il vrai qu'à tes genoux
Je te dis un jour 'Je t'aime' ?
J'ai rêvé qu'alors toi-même
Me redis ce mot si doux.
Ah, ce n'est pas vrai ! Ah, non,
Ce n'est pas vrai—non—non !
J'ai rêvé qu'alors toi-même
Me redis ce mot si doux.

There is a passion in his voice as he ends, that quivers through the room and the hearts of his hearers. Lady Anne,

a true lover of music, is profoundly touched, and stands gazing at the singer with tears in her eyes. The others are all impressed more or less as their souls are capable of quickening, and Mrs. Daryl being those of the lower class has time to turn an almost involuntary glance on Lady Branksmere.

Muriel is standing well within the shelter of a velvet *portière*, but her face is in the light. It is pale, rigid—hardly a living face, so white it is and still—hardly flesh and blood at all, but rather the mere simulacrum of a breathing woman. Her hands hanging loosely before her are tensely clasped; she seems to have lost all memory of where she is, and of those around her. A tremulous ray from the departing sun falling through the painted window opposite, lies like a still caress upon her lowered lids.

The shadow of a terrible grief is desolating her beautiful face. Some cruel thought—a crushing remembrance—hitherto subdued, seems now to have sprung into fresh life, and to have reached a colossal height. That music has undone her, quite. Is she thinking of the singer only, and how he had in the old days sung it to her again and again? Or is she grieving only for the days when he had sung it—when she was free with all the world before her where to choose? Mrs. Billy, gazing at her with reflective eyes that have a kindly sorrow in their soft depths, cannot decide which.

Somebody drags a chair with a little rasping noise along the polished floor, and Lady Branksmere starts as though violently awakened. In an incredibly short moment, as it seems to Wilhelmina, she is herself again. She draws a quick breath that is too nervous to be a sigh, and steps with a slow, dignified motion into the very centre of the gallery.

‘Thank you. It is a charming song,’ she says indifferently, turning her gaze full on Captain Staines. ‘I always think you are better worth listening to than most people. Now for your waltz,’ smiling at Mrs. Amyot.

She seats herself at the vacant piano and lets the first bars of the last brilliant waltz float through the room.

CHAPTER XI.

I will not let thee sleep, nor eat, nor drink ;
But I will ring thee such a piece of chiding,
Thou shalt confess the troubled sea more calm.

‘THE Dowager Lady Branksmere’s love to Lady Branksmere, and she will be pleased to receive her this afternoon.’ The message sounds more like a command than a wish, and Muriel, with a little resigned shrug of her shoulders, throws aside her brush and prepares to obey it.

‘I wish I could go with you—she is interesting, as fossils usually are—but the fact is she abhors me. I am too large, too healthy, too fleshy for her,’ laughs Lady Anne, wheeling round on the piano-stool ; ‘I look out of place in that ghastly old room of hers.’

‘I can’t see that you are more robust than Madame von Thirsk. Yet she tolerates her,’ says Muriel, with a keen glance at her sister-in-law.

‘She adores her,’ corrects Lady Anne. ‘There is some tremendous bond between them. I don’t quite know how the friendship arose, but it began about seven years ago, about the year poor Arthur was killed.’ She always alludes to her dead husband as ‘poor Arthur,’ and is ever very kindly in her mention of him, though perhaps she had hardly reason to be proud of him when he was alive. To her, however, he had always been fastidiously attentive, and his memory lives strong within her still. ‘You know Arthur was her favourite. He was the eldest, and it was only by a luckless chance that Branksmere came in for the title. You know all about that duel?’—she is talking confidentially to Muriel, and now bends over the table near, so as to make her lowered voice heard.

‘I knew he had been killed in a duel ; that is all.’

‘Branksmere, George, your husband, was with him at the time. He, George, hinted to me that it was a quarrel about money ; but he was so distressed, that I knew the wretched affair had arisen out of some fault of poor Arthur’s. He was rather wild, you see, and had an ungovernable temper. From what I could drag out of Branksmere, who was most reticent about it, I should say poor Arthur lost himself over some affair in a billiard saloon, and grossly insulted the man by

whom he believed he had been cheated.' She pauses. 'He was shot dead,' she says in a low whisper, tapping her fingers nervously upon the table.

'How terrible—for you.'

'Yes, terrible. But, do you know, I can think of it now quite calmly. It all happened so long ago, you see. Seven years is a tremendous space nowadays. Yes, it all happened the year Madame first came to the Castle. Poor Arthur was killed about the beginning of the year, and she came here about six months afterwards. I remember it perfectly. She was a friend of some people Branksmere knew in Tuscany.'

'She seems to have given up Tuscany and made her home in England—in Branksmere, rather.'

'Yes. I shouldn't mind that if I were you. She is very good to the old lady, and useful when the Dowager has one of her troublesome days. Going to her now?'

'I wish you could come with me.'

'I shouldn't be welcome.'

'Would I do?' asks Mrs. Amyot amiably.

'I am afraid you would be worse than Lady Anne,' says Muriel smiling. 'You are too bright, too airy. It is only ghostly, bony people like me she can endure. I shall give your kind regards to Lady Branksmere, however, if you like.'

'What a tiresome number of Lady Branksmeres there are!' remarks Mrs. Vyner idly.

'Too many,' acquiesces Lady Anne. 'There is the Dowager, there is I, there is Muriel. I felt so horrified at the idea of being placed as No. 2 amongst the Dowagers, that I went back to my old name, and became if not Lady Anne Hare, at least Lady Anne. A safe return, Muriel,' as the present Lady Branksmere moves towards the door.

'Then I won't do?' asks Mrs. Amyot pathetically.

'Yes, you will, for me admirably,' says Halkett, who had just stepped in through the window. 'So take heart, and a tennis racket at the same time. We are having such a game out here. Come one, come all, of you, and let's make an afternoon of it.'

Muriel, crossing the halls slowly, being in no haste to gain the chamber where the old dame lies in solitary state, comes suddenly face to face with Captain Staines. A longing to go by without waiting to exchange with him a word of civility presses sore on Lady Branksmere, but the doing so would be an act of discourtesy as they two are circumstanced,

so that perforce she turns a coldly smiling face to his. Her heart is beating rapidly, almost to suffocation. It is the first moment since that happy far-away past that she has found herself alone with him.

'You should go out ; the others are on the tennis ground,' she says, in a dull, stifled sort of way, keeping up the stereotyped smile by a supreme effort. She nods to him, and goes quickly onward.

'One moment, Lady Branksmere,' exclaims he in a low tone, arresting her footsteps. 'One only. What have I done that you should avoid me ?'

'I do not avoid you,' icily.

'I fear you do. I fear my presence here is a matter of dissatisfaction to you.'

His eyes are bent moodily upon the ground ; a settled melancholy is darkening his handsome face. If it is a fictitious melancholy it is very well done indeed.

'But I have arranged about that,' he goes on gloomily. 'A telegram to-morrow will rid you of me. I shall leave as suddenly as I came.'

'I beg you will not do this thing. I assure you there is no reason why you should,' says Lady Branksmere haughtily.

Her proud lips have taken a still prouder curve, and she toys with the fan she holds in a rather rapid way that betokens anger only half concealed.

'There is a reason,' breaks out Staines, in a low tone, full of suppressed passion. 'If *you* are dead to the past I am not. I know now I should never have come here—now that it is too late.'

'And why not here ?' demands she, with flashing eyes. The words fall from her angrily, impulsively ; even as they ring in her ears she would have given worlds to recall them. The question is hers. She has laid herself open to the answer ; she has in a manner pledged herself to listen to it. A gleam of triumph shoots into his blue eyes.

'Because *you* are here,' he returns slowly. 'Need I have said that ? Did you not know my answer ? I was mad when I accepted your—Lord Branksmere's—invitation, but I could not refuse it. But now that I have come—now that I have seen'—his voice sinks almost to a whisper—'when all the old sweet memories force themselves back upon me, I feel I dare not remain.'

'You will please yourself about that, of course,' answers

Muriel coldly. She turns away as if to pursue her course upstairs.

'To go will not please me,' declares he hurriedly.

'Then stay,' indifferently. Her tone is admirably calm, but the hand that holds her fan is trembling, and he sees it.

'Are you a stone?' he cries vehemently. 'Have you *altogether* forgotten?'

Lady Branksmere pauses abruptly and turns to him a marble face.

'Altogether!' she says stonily.

'I won't believe it,' protests he. 'What! in this little space of time to have all, *all* blotted out! Nay, I defy you to say it from your heart. Now and again some thought from out the sweet past must rise within your breast. Yet love could never have been to you what it was to me. You wronged me, Muriel, as only a woman can wrong a man. You betrayed me.'

'I?'

'You. Was *I* the one who first broke faith? Have *I* married? And now, standing here together face to face once more, you tell me I have no longer a place even in your thoughts—that it is nothing to you whether I go or stay?'

His last words are a question.

'Nothing,' returns she slowly. And then, as though suddenly mindful of her duties as a hostess, she bestows upon him a faint wintry society smile. 'I shall nevertheless be very pleased if you will stay with us for a little while,' she says languidly.

'I accept your invitation,' declares Staines suddenly, almost defiantly, and turning away strides impatiently down a side corridor—to find himself all but in the arms of Madame von Thirsk!

CHAPTER XII.

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;
And there I see such black and grainéd spots,
'As will not leave their tinct.

WHAT has she seen? What heard? There has been no moment given him in which to recover his equanimity. So that his open perplexity is apparent to her. It appears to

amuse her. Looking him fairly in the face, she breaks into low laughter that has a touch of contempt in it.

‘Well met,’ she says airily.

‘That of course, if you allow it,’ returns he gallantly. He has recovered himself by this time, and now awaits her attack if it is to be made. He has studied Madame von Thirsk from a distance for the last year or so, and has, during the few days spent now at Branksmere with her, come to one or two conclusions about her.

‘Yet you scarcely seemed overjoyed to meet me a moment since,’ smiles she, in her swift, curious fashion.

‘Natural enough. You startled me. I might have hurt you coming round that corner. By-the-by, I nearly ran you down, didn’t I?’ carelessly but cautiously.

‘Very nearly.’

‘Not a nice thing to be run to earth, eh?’ says Staines meaningly, with a bold look at her. ‘But you see I was in a hurry, and didn’t expect you would have taken up a position in this solitary spot.’ Again she is aware that he is watching her.

‘You seemed in hot haste, indeed,’ returns she, still with that inexplicable smile that is momentarily exasperating him. ‘Quite as if you were running away from something. What was it?’ glancing at him from under her sleepy lids. A *second* disappointment?’

Staines’ eyes contract.

‘Madame,’ replies he deliberately, ‘you speak in parables. A *second* disappointment implies a first. You allude to——?’

Whatever half-formed plan Madame had in her head takes shape and colour now. She leans forward, elevates her shoulders, and makes a little graceful gesture towards the hall where Staines had just had his interview with Lady Branksmere.

‘Madame is beautiful!’ she whispers, throwing out her exquisitely shaped hands with an expressive movement. Then with a complete change of manner, that enrages him even more than her affected gaiety, ‘Ah, believe me or not, as you will—I have indeed felt sorrow for you,’ she murmurs, with a glance full of deepest sympathy.

“‘A fellow feeling,’” quotes Staines, with an ugly sneer, “‘makes us wondrous kind.’” My disappointment, as you call it, was hardly greater than yours. Seven years is a long time in which to strive, only to be at last—*undone*.’

Her colour fades. She steps back involuntarily, and a dangerous light creeps into her dark eyes.

'Come! That was hardly fair of me,' laughs Staines in a conciliatory way. 'But it was your own fault—you led up to it, you know. You shouldn't bring the war into the enemy's camp unless you are prepared for reprisals. Sorry if I appeared unchivalrous, but you would have it, you know.'

'You mean?' exclaims Madame, forcing the words from between her clenched teeth.

'Pshaw! Nothing to make you look so tragical,' returns Staines, moving on a step or two. Madame, following, lays a firm hand upon his arm.

'You do not leave this,' she declares fiercely, 'until you have explained what it was you meant.'

'That Branksmere was as good a *parti* as there is in England,' retorts he contemptuously. 'Take it then, as you insist on it.'

'You know nothing—*nothing*,' cries she with an angry sob. All the passionate fire of love that has been consuming her throughout these weary hopeless years springs into arms at this slight that has been cast upon it. Were he, Branksmere, the veriest beggar that crawled the earth her whole soul would have gone out to him, as it went out on that first day when—when——

She comes back to the present hour to find Staines is talking to her in a low earnest tone.

'Why should we quarrel over the fact that we have each made a discovery of the other's secret? Let us be comrades rather. A common grievance such as ours,' with a short laugh, 'should have the effect of creating between us a link of sympathy.'

He holds out his hand to her as though desirous at once of forging this link, but Madame declines to see it. He comes a degree closer to her.

'Think,' he whispers impressively, 'whether I can be of no service to you in this matter?'

'In what way, sir?'

'That I leave to your woman's wit to answer,' returns he, with a half-insolent uplifting of his brows.

She is silent, her eyes bent upon the ground. That she is deeply pondering on his words is plain to him. Very slowly the warm colour recedes from her lips and brow, and a heavy frown settles upon her broad forehead. Her breath comes

from her heavily, and her mouth is compressed. It is evident that she is the victim of a fierce struggle, now taking place within her. She is in many ways an unscrupulous woman—a woman of strong passions, capable of knowing a love powerful as death, or a hatred as keen and lasting as that love—yet now the thought that is presenting itself to her, in all its naked hideousness, appals and disgusts her.

‘You can’t make up your mind, then?’ suggests he mockingly. ‘Perhaps you think I overestimate my power of usefulness.’

‘No. I don’t doubt you there.’ She lifts her head and looks at him steadily. Her eyes search his.

‘And yet you shrink—you hesitate. I tell you there is no need for compunction. They are less than nothing to each other,’ says the tempter slowly.

‘It is of him, of him alone, I think,’ she breaks in vehemently. ‘As for her, let her go. I owe her nothing but hatred for a studied course of insolence since the first hour we met. But there is his happiness to be considered.’

She has thrown off the mask a good deal, and in the excitement of the moment seems to feel no shame in baring her heart to this man.

‘Pshaw!’ scornfully. ‘Is it not open to all the world to read between the lines? It was a caprice, a mere passing fancy on his part—a desire for a pretty face, of which he has already tired. The fancy, the caprice are dead.’

‘I am not so sure of that. If I *were*——’ she pauses.

‘You would feel more free to act? Why, look into it, as it stands. Would a man who loved neglect the object of that love, as he does *her*? Would he deliberately and openly betray in a thousand ways—with a meaning glance at her—‘his preference for another?’

‘There is no such preference as that of which you hint,’ returns she gloomily.

‘There you wrong *yourself*. Yet, granting you are right, does that make it any the easier for you to prove his love for *her*? When does he seek her side? When does a tender glance, a kindly word pass between them? Has he even a forced smile for her?’

‘No. And yet——’ She hesitates, grows suddenly silent, and Staines, noting the quick changes in her mobile face, plays his trump card.

‘Had he even the last lingering remnants of a worn-out

love for her,' he says, with cold contempt, 'would he have invited *me* here?'

'He was ignorant of your former relations with her. He knew nothing,' cries she eagerly. 'Nothing! I have it from his own lips.'

'Then he lied to you,' declares Staines coolly, giving voice to his falsehood in a clear, distinct tone. 'For he had the whole story from *my* lips before ever I accepted his invitation. Some absurdly Quixotic impulse drove me at the moment to mention it.'

'Is that the truth?' asks she, in a terribly eager way. The question is almost a whisper, but so wild, so intense, that it thrills through him. She is looking at him with her large glittering eyes as though she would read his very soul.

'If you doubt me *ask him*,' returns he boldly.

She sighs deeply, and throws up her head as if suffocating, and he knows he has won the day, and gained an ally who will—who *shall* be—of incalculable service to him in the gaining of the abominable end he has in view. With Madame, indeed, the struggle is at an end. A gleam from within is lighting up her dark expressive face—a devilish gleam. That Staines should know her secret is bitter to her, but that *she* should suspect it—she! If treated with coldness now, may he not at any moment betray her, and to that woman of all others? No, that shall never be! She will enter into a compact with him, and so purchase his silence. As for the rest, for the future, it will reveal itself. And if a fall should follow on the footsteps of that haughty spirit, why, why? The cruel gleam upon her face deepens in intensity; yet, as though prompted by her good angel to one last throb of compunction, she turns to Staines.

'You love her?' she asks hurriedly.

'I have not asked *you* if you love *him*,' retorts he coldly.

'True.' She winces a little.

'It is then a bond between us to help each other when we can?' demands he.

'A bond—yes. But remember I pledge myself to nothing,' answers she thoughtfully.

No explanations follow. There is no word of counsel or advice. Madame von Thirsk, as she sweeps slowly away from him down the corridor, does not so much as cast a parting glance upon the man with whom she has entered into a most unholy alliance.

CHAPTER XIII.

The careful cold hath nipt my rugged rind,
And in my face deep furrows eld hath plight;
My head besprent with hoary frost I find,
And by mine eye the crow his claw doth wright;
Delight is laid abed, and pleasure past;
No sun now shines, clouds have all overcast.

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MEANWHILE Muriel, going slowly up the stairs to the Dowager's room, feels as though her feet are clad with leaden wings. If she had been victorious in the late interview with the man who had once been so much to her, it was certainly a victory that cost her dear. However strongly she had held herself at the time, she now feels faint-hearted enough and utterly unstrung. Alas! what sweet hours he had recalled, when life meant liberty and love, and she was Muriel only—untitled, unshackled, free!

And that last accusation of his had smitten her sore. *Had* she wronged him? *Had* she betrayed? Her mind wandered back in a true line to the old days, the old glad moments, when she had strayed with him through meads and flowering tracts, made rich with autumn's dying perfumes; days when she had thought of him as the one man in all the world for her. If she had then shrunk from a life of poverty, sweetened even though it might be by love, why, so had he!

He had spoken much of that self-same wondrous love in those past hours, had toyed with the idea of marriage, had presented many a pretty picture of wedded happiness to her inward view, but always with a reservation. As her mind now gathers about that past time, there comes to her an even fuller conviction than of old, that there had always inextricably mingled with the adoration a tenderly expressed regret, a half-veiled renunciation of the joys portrayed, an unspoken yet clearly conveyed reluctance to 'cast his all upon the die.'

To her, too, bred in it as she was, poverty had seemed then all but a crime. She had felt every word he had hinted rather than said, so keenly—had so abhorred the idea of dwelling for ever in the ungilded paths whereon her childhood's feet had trod—that she hardly paused then to tell herself that he was counting the cost as no true lover should.

But now, to-day when he has cast the charge in her teeth, her whole soul rises up in arms, and she defends herself to herself with passionate vehemence.

At least she had not been the more mercenary of the two. They had been quits so far, and when after her engagement to Branksmere the wild letter of upbraiding had come to her from the man who, she believed, would understand and acquiesce in her decision—whose own doctrines she felt she had imbibed and was now acting up to—she had been struck with a sudden fear, but had failed to comprehend.

She had quailed indeed when she thought of years filled with sordid care, but it was he who had carefully pointed out to her those cares. No earnest pleading had been used to give her strength to endure for dear love's sake alone. Even that letter, so replete with angry reproach, had contained no entreaty to cast aside her allegiance to Lord Branksmere and fling herself with honest abandonment into her lover's arms. Some hidden strain of knowledge whispers to her that she would not now be Lady Branksmere had Staines been stauncher, more persistent in his wooing; that there might have been a moment when she would have counted the world well lost for what is now lost to her for ever!

There had been no formal parting between them, only a last scene that had not been spoken of by him as final, though to Muriel it had seemed so. Still no farewell had been spoken beyond an ordinary one that breathed of fresh meetings in the future, and that night Staines went up to town for an indefinite period, and next morning Branksmere had arrived; Branksmere, who had proposed to her the year before and been refused, and who now knelt at her feet again beseeching a kinder answer! He had sworn he loved her, and she had believed him.

At this point in her meditations Muriel drops into a low cushioned seat in one of the staircase windows and laughs aloud, softly but with an indescribable bitterness. Yes! she had believed him. He appeared to her suddenly as a way out of her difficulty. A steady barrier should, and must, be placed between her and Staines for ever; Branksmere should be that barrier! That she could not endure an existence bald of worldly comforts she had been led to believe by subtlest means: and now left to itself, with no strength from without on which to lean, the poor reed broke. She accepted Branksmere!

And now? She rises wearily from her seat in the great painted window, and goes on her unwilling way to the Dowager's apartments. Now she has neither husband's nor lover's love. One she cannot, the other she dare not grasp. Nothing is left her but the filthy lucre for which she has paid away all the priceless gladness of her fresh young life. Alas! what dead sea-fruit it seems within her mouth.

She shivers a little as she reaches the heavy hanging curtain that hides the entrance to the corridor that leads not only to the Dowager's apartments, but to those of Madame von Thirsk. She stops short, and clasps her hands together as though very cold, then pushes back the curtain and enters the dreary corridor within. Beyond her lies the other curtain that hides the large door that leads to Madame's own rooms; those rooms that no one may enter save Madame herself and——

She draws a heavy breath. A sense of suffocation weighs her down. It is the first time she has been here since that afternoon when Mrs. Stout had escorted her through the upper parts of the house in the character of cicerone, and the remembrance of that hour lies now with a deadly weight on Muriel. She rouses herself, however, and, turning resolutely towards old Lady Branksmere's room, knocks gently at the door.

It is opened to her by a tall gaunt woman with a peculiarly bloodless face and eyes deeply set and colourless, that may once have been pale blue, but are now almost as white as the balls that surround them. She is a woman advanced in years, but specially muscular, with long lithe fingers, bloodless too, and a length of jaw that suggests the idea that the mind is as firm as the body.

She drops back a step or two in a respectful fashion as Muriel enters, and then returns to her station beside the bed.

The room is semi-lighted, the curtains being closely drawn as if to kill all remembrance of the blessed sunshine that reigns without. A smell of mould pervades the air—a dull, damp, sickly odour suggestive of the idea that the windows have been hermetically sealed for many years. Some oak chairs, black with age and elaborately carved, line the walls, that are painted a dull ochre; and a bureau, oak too and blackened by time, and grim and uncompromising in appearance, reaches halfway up to the ceiling, which is vaulted.

A sullen fire is burning in the huge grate, and a black cat

gaunt as Mrs. Brooks—who had opened the door for Muriel—sits upon the hearthrug staring at the flickering flames with an expression of diabolical malignancy upon its ebon face. As Muriel advances, this brute turns its head slowly round and spits at her in a malevolent fashion. Muriel, with a slight shudder, shrinks away from it, and Mrs. Brooks again comes forward.

‘Be quiet, then, my beauty, my sweetheart!’ she murmurs absurdly to the creature, that, only half appeased by her soothing, stands erect and arches its monstrous back and follows Muriel’s movements with its baleful eyes, green as emeralds.

The dull flames emit a duller light; through the closed curtains a feeble ray is struggling. Muriel, peering anxiously into this obscurity, finds at last the occupant of the room who has desired her presence.

In a four-poster of enormous dimensions, hung with curtains of dingy satin—that perchance a hundred years ago were bright and fresh—lies a figure, a mere shell of our poor humanity! A wizened, aged, witchlike face looks out from the pillows; a face that but for the eyes, which are supernaturally large and brilliant, might well be mistaken for a piece of parchment, and would probably have gone unnoticed altogether in the twilight gloom of the apartment. These eyes, burning with their inward fire, convey to Muriel the sudden fancy that they have been the consuming furnaces which have reduced the attenuated frame to its present state of emaciation, yet have had the power to keep the life within it all these interminable years.

Two gaunt hands, delicately formed, but inhuman in aspect, and more like claws than hands, are resting on the faded but gorgeous counterpane; every now and then they pluck nervously, spasmodically, at the air. The lips, fleshless and drawn, fail to conceal the toothless gums within; and the scant and hoary locks brushed tightly back from the forehead in the fashion of a past era, are bound by a funereal band of black velvet that serves to heighten the ghastliness of the half-living picture, and betray more openly the skinny proportions of the weird old face.

Repelled yet fascinated, Muriel gazes upon her husband’s grandmother! Although this is not her first introduction to her, she now sustains a severe shock as she looks again upon this melancholy wreck of what once was one of nature’s brightest

efforts—this belle of a bygone day; this poor spent frame now grown repulsive, that the tomb should long ago have sought and gained!

The Dowager seems unaware of her presence until Mrs. Brooks, stooping over her, lays her hand upon her shoulder.

‘It is Lady Branksmere, Madame. She has come to see you—at your request.’

‘Ay, ay! I know. I am sick of the name,’ returns the old woman querulously. ‘There are so many of them. My Lady Branksmere of to-day—and she of yesterday—and she of the day before! Why don’t some of ’em die—eh?’—she looks up at her attendant with a senile indignation, as though blaming her for the longevity of the women of her own house. Though who should die the first but she herself?

‘Eh?—eh?’—she persists, striking Mrs. Brooks with her palsied hand.

‘I don’t know, Madame. Time will do it perhaps,’ returns the attendant doubtfully. Time, it seems to her, has been a long time dancing attendance on the uncanny old person in the bed.

‘Slaves count time,’ quarrels the miserable wreck vacantly. ‘It has nothing to do with *us*. Who spoke of my Lady Branksmere? Was it you, Brooks? You should know better. She will never be my lady now—no—never!’

‘Hush, Madame——’

‘But what of her—the little one? She that ought to have been my lady, but wasn’t. What of her, Brooks? Is she coming to me? Tell me, woman, or I’ll strike you!’

‘Not to day, Madame,’ soothingly.

‘She should then. Memory is quick within me. All, all comes back to me to-day. Seven years ago, Brooks; seven years. My poor little boy! my poor fellow!’

She is beginning to ramble hopelessly. Her claw-like hands are moving convulsively, and her eager, feverish eyes are sparkling.

‘Your ladyship will excuse her,’ entreats Mrs. Brooks, turning to Muriel with a sedate curtesy. ‘It is not one of Madame’s good days.’ She curtsseys again when she has finished this apology, but not a muscle of her face stirs. Is she really concerned? or too accustomed, perhaps, to know any nervousness?

‘What is that you are saying, Brooks?’ cries the Dowager shrilly. ‘And who is that lurking behind the curtains? Let

'em stand forward ! D'ye hear ? What are they hiding for, eh ?' Here, catching sight of Muriel, memory again, dull though her mind is with regard to present things, takes fire, and she knows her. Old habits return to her—old dignity. It is quite wonderful to see the way in which she draws herself up, and bends her stiff old body to the young woman who is now the Queen Regnant of the House of Branksmere.

'You do an old woman much honour ! I am very pleased to see you, my dear,' she says proudly but sweetly, with the full return of the grand old manner that had been hers half a century ago. 'Pray be seated. Brooks ! a chair for my Lady Branksmere. It is a gracious action of yours, my dear, to grant the dying a few minutes out of your young life !'

Here, alas ! the vital spark grows dull again, and returns to its sad flickering, that is but the prelude of its death. The touch of strength the worn-out brain had received dies away, and, stooping forward, the old woman twines her bony fingers round Muriel's white wrist and breaks into futile mumblings—mutterings born of the one thought that clings to her tired mind.

'Have you seen her yet—the little thing in her white gown ?' she asks, mouthing and grinning horribly. 'Such a pretty creature ! It isn't you I'm talking of, you will know, because you are Lady Branksmere, and she isn't. She can't be now, they tell me. But she was the prettiest little soul, and all in white—in white !'

'Recollect yourself, Madame !' whispers Mrs. Brooks severely, bending over the bed and laying her hand with a warning pressure upon the skeleton's arm. It may have been a rather strenuous pressure, because the old woman breaks instantly into a feeble whimpering.

'Go away, Brooks. You hurt me. Go away, I say. Nobody understands me but Thekla. Where is Thekla ? Ah ! *she* knows the little one.'

She pauses and gazes vacantly at Muriel. Then again her dying intellect so far revives that her mind recurs vividly once more to the subject that had filled her before Brooks' interruption.

'Thekla knows !—*she* will tell you,' she whispers, leaning towards Muriel, who has grown very pale. The old woman's strange words, the evident desire of the attendant to silence her, have suggested to her strong confirmation of the doubts

that are already at work within her. Seven years ago, Madame had said! Seven years ago was Madame von Thirsk a pale, slender maiden? Did she wear a white gown? Was it she who should have been Lady Branksmere in her—Muriel's—place?

She leans back in her chair and tries to concentrate her thoughts, but she is unnerved and unstrung, and the effort to analyse her fears is beyond her. Her meeting with Staines, and his unjust accusation, had upset her more than she was quite aware, and now this interview with the Dowager has brought matters to a climax.

A sensation of faintness creeps over her as she sits still and motionless beside the four-poster, hearing but not heeding the idle wanderings of its occupant. In truth, it seems to her that she has heard enough when she has added the incoherent ramblings just uttered to the evidence of her own senses; the Dowager's broken words—her revelation as it almost seems to Muriel—these wild gibberings of a crazy old woman, have had in them, doubtless, the one great grain of truth; a truth that, forced upon her at this moment, seems more than she can bear.

A longing to escape, to get away from her immediate surroundings, to be alone, takes possession of her. She rises precipitately to her feet.

'Stay, stay!' cries the Dowager, stretching out her skinny hand as if to detain her forcibly. 'You haven't told me yet if you have *seen* her. She who ought to be you, you know—— But it is seven years ago. Seven years! No, Brooks,' testily, 'I will *not* be silent; I *will* ask her. Why should she not be told? It is a sad story, and my Lady Branksmere here, seems to me to have a tender heart. Ah! it would melt a harder heart than hers to hear the story of the little one. Such love—such devotion, and all for naught! Now it is too late!' She beckons eagerly to Muriel. 'You need bear no malice, my dear; it is, indeed, too late, as you know. Nothing could make her Lady Branksmere now! Yet that is what she craves—what she craves for night and day. Sometimes I hear her *in the dead of night*.'

She leans forward, half rising in her bed, and stares wildly at the opposite wall; with a gaze, however, that pierces through the solid masonry into the realms of a disordered fancy.

'I don't ask you if you see her now?' she whispers,

wildly clutching at Muriel's arm. 'I can see her for myself. Look! *Look*, I say. She is there. There! in her little white frock, with—— What is that, Brooks? What is *that*?' shouts she violently. 'Is it blood—*his blood*? D'y'e see the red spots upon her gown? They are his—*his*, I tell you—his heart's blood drawn from his pierced breast! Oh, Arthur! Oh, my pretty boy!'

She points frantically with her palsied hand towards space, and drops back exhausted upon her pillow, inert—all but lifeless.

'You must not heed her, my lady; she is not herself to-day,' says Mrs. Brooks hurriedly, her face looking a degree more bloodless than usual. 'My late lord's death made a terrible impression upon her. She sees visions at times, or fancies she does. There is no truth in anything she says! I pray you to remember that, Madam! He was her favourite grandson, you see, and his sudden death, caused by such awful means, unsettled her poor brain.'

'I know—I understand,' murmurs Muriel in a stifled tone, with the last remnant of calm that she can muster. Releasing herself gently, but abruptly, from the Dowager's grasp, now grown feeble and purposeless, she rushes precipitately from the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

He was so glad, that I can not express,
In no mannère his mirth, and his gladnéss.

FINDING the hall door lying hospitably open, he enters the house without the usual rat-tat, and traverses the hall without meeting a soul. It is so unlike the Manor to be devoid of flesh and noise, even in unsuspected quarters, that thus to find the very entrance silent and deserted suggests to Mr. Paulyn very sinister possibilities. He goes farther, but still no sound falls on his anxious ears. Listen as he may, there come to him no squeals from the fat twins, no violent arguments in Peter's dulcet bass, no tearful expostulations on the part of Angelica, no indignant remonstrances from Margery. Have they all been spirited away? Has Madame, the sister-in-law, crushed their youthful gaiety? Where is the riotous band of which he once was enrolled a member? Where are

the shouts that rang last year? A misgiving creeps over the Honourable Tommy. Surely this death-like stillness bodes no good! His cousins are in the hands of the Foe!

The library is reached and found empty. The schoolroom is invaded with a sinking heart; but here, too, desolation reigns. Good gracious! Where *are* they? What on earth has happened? The piano is lying open, and Mr. Paulyn, seating himself upon the music-stool—he never can keep himself off a music-stool—looks mournfully down upon the yellowing keys.

‘I hope the new importation isn’t playing the very dooce with ‘em all,’ he soliloquises plaintively, doubt, that has suddenly grown into a grim conviction, desolating his tone, which naturally is cheerful in the extreme. ‘But it looks bad. No yells, no skirmishing, not so much as a cushion aimed at a fellow’s head from behind a half-opened door. It *does* look poor! It is one of two things—either they have all succumbed to the plague or the cholera, or Billy’s wife is an out-and-outer. Well, I’ll solve the riddle at once. If any of them are still in the land of the living, *this* will fetch ‘em.’

He lays violent hands upon the long-suffering instrument, whereupon thunders uprise from it suggestive of that touching melody commonly known as ‘Tommy Dodd.’ This soft and soothing air rings through the room. It is, indeed, no exaggeration, and only allowing bare justice to Mr. Paulyn’s fingers, to say it rings through the house. Mrs. Billy, in the morning-room, hearing it, drops her flowers. The cook in the kitchen stays to hearken to it with uplifted roller. The maid in the scullery executes a small war-dance in time to the stately measure whilst crying aloud, ‘Why, that’s Master Tommy, for sure!’ Mr. Bellew, making his usual entrance into the house by means of the schoolroom window, is so staggered by it that he pauses midway, with one foot on the balcony and one on the carpet inside. And Margery, rushing wildly through the hall, darts like a swallow into the old room and literally flings herself into the musician’s arms.

‘Dear old thing!’ she cries ecstatically. ‘To think you’ve really come! Oh, Tommy! I say, how *nice* it is to see you again!’

She gives him a little shake as if to make more sure of him, and then a smart thump between his shoulders. This thump is full of love and good fellowship.

‘Why, there you are, Margery, old girl! And how *are*

you?' returns the Honourable Tommy, drawing her down upon his knee and expanding into a broad grin of the very utmost delight. 'Pretty well, eh? Bearing up, eh? *That's* right. Never say die is your motto, I take it; and let me tell you I admire your spirit.'

'You ought to,' says Margery gaily, who is a little at sea as to his meaning. 'You have had plenty of time to study it. What brought you down at this ungodly period? You, who are so fond of your Pall Mall?'

'I am not sure, unless it was to see you,' returns Mr. Paulyn gallantly. 'I met Branksmere one day in Piccadilly, and he seized hold of me as though he were a policeman. "Come alonger me," said he, and I hadn't much of an excuse ready, so I comed.'

'It doesn't matter a bit how or why you came, so long as you are here,' declares Margery lovingly.

All this, you may be sure, is creating pure rapture in the bosom of the young man who is still standing transfixed between the room and the balcony. His eyes are glittering by this time, his brow his black. To say, indeed, that Mr. Bellew is now on the verge of laying himself open to a charge of manslaughter would convey to you but a small impression of the real state of his mind. Margery! *Margery!* sitting on that fellow's knee, looking into his eyes, and actually *thumping* him! (That loving thump had gone to his very soul.) Good Heavens! What a sorry fool he has been!

He brings the leg that has been lagging on the balcony into the room, with a resounding thud that arouses the two at the piano. They both look up at him, but if he had expected to draw forth signs of guilt upon their countenances he has made a great mistake. So far from being even disconcerted by his sudden appearance, Miss Daryl maintains an unmoved exterior, and is sufficiently lost to all feelings of remorse as to continue her seat upon Mr. Paulyn's knee.

'There you are, Curzon,' she says quite carelessly, which, being a self-evident fact, calls for no rejoinder from the infuriated young man.

'Ah, Bellew! glad to see you. How are you, old chap?' asks Paulyn, who seems to be overflowing with good-nature.

'Quite well, thank you,' in a freezing tone, and with a glance full of the deadliest hatred.

'That's all right! So am I,' declares Mr. Paulyn cheerfully, as though sure of the other's reception of this satisfactory

news. 'Oh, by Jove, here's Angelica!' He bundles Margery off his knee without apology, and hurries towards his younger cousin, who pauses when she sees him, and spreads abroad her pretty hands in sheer amazement, and colours generously.

Like a pale lily she stands, erect, slender, half child, half woman. Mr. Paulyn, who is doubtless a person of good taste, seems delighted with her, and kisses her warmly in cousinly fashion—an infliction to which she submits calmly, but without any expressed disapprobation. She even smiles upon him, but from a distance, as it were, and seems rather glad than otherwise because of his presence.

'Well, she hasn't starved you, at all events. You were always slight you know,' says Tommy, gazing at her intently.

This remarkable speech is received in an amazed silence that gives time for the door to be again flung open to admit the twins, who rush tumultuously towards him, and fling their little plump arms around his neck.

'Indeed, I might even go farther and say she has fattened you,' continued Tommy, holding back the twins at arms' length, both to study their proportions and to avoid their caresses, which are numerous and clammy.

This remark also seems full of puzzlement to those around him; even the twins, who never think of anything under the sun, are aroused by it, and look inquisitive.

'Well, how does she treat you?' asks the Hon. Tommy, sinking his voice to a mysterious whisper. 'Is she supportable, or the very devil, eh? I'm afraid it's the latter. But you'll have to bear up, you know. "A frog he would a-wooing go, whether his mother would have it or no." Old song! 'Member it? That's your case with Billy, don't you see?'

'But——' begins Margery eagerly.

'Yes, of course. I quite understand all that. Beastly hard upon you all. But what I say is—don't give in to her *too much*! Hold up your heads! March! Give yourselves airs! There's a lot of *you*, and only *one* of her, and I don't see why the crowd shouldn't win the day.'

'There isn't any day to win,' declares Angelica, lifting her pencilled brows. 'It's won already.'

'Then more shame for you—a poor spirited lot,' exclaims Mr. Paulyn scornfully. 'To be sat upon at the very first assault. I'm disgusted with you all. I believed there was some sort of go amongst you, and now?—What kind is she, eh?' with a startling drop from the high falutin' to the ordinary gossipy tone.

'*She?* Who on earth, Tommy, are you alluding to?' asks Margery with some asperity.

'Why, to Mrs. Daryl, of course,' very justly aggrieved. 'Who did you think?'

'How often have I warned you that your incoherency will be your ruin! From the way you spoke, one might quite as easily believe you were talking of the man in the moon as of Billy's wife.'

'If you exert your brain a little bit you will remember that I said "*she*,"' retorts Mr. Paulyn, who is now deeply incensed. 'And I never heard of a *woman* in the moon. Did you?'

'Here she is!' cry the twins at this moment in a breath. All turn in a slightly awed manner to the door.

CHAPTER XV.

He said,
Or right or wrong, what came into his head.

AFTER all it is only Mrs. Billy herself who meets their expectant gaze—Mrs. Billy, gowned in a charming costume of white serge, and accompanied by Dick. Her bonny face is wreathed in smiles, and she accosts Margery in quite a radiant fashion.

'See here, Meg. I've got a real good thing to——' But at this she stops dead short, and the good thing is lost for ever. She stares inquiringly at Tommy, who is generously returning the attention, having his round eyes fixed immovably upon her. At last Mrs. Billy gives way. She smiles broadly.

'You don't help me, Meg,' she says with a little laugh. 'The situation, I have no doubt, is full of interest, but as yet I am rather in the dark. Is this,' with a second swift glance at Paulyn, 'another of your young men?'

At this question, uttered in the airiest manner possible, Mr. Bellew—who up to this has maintained a silence charged with dynamite—breaks into a short sepulchral laugh! It ends almost as it began, and nobody takes the slightest notice of it except Margery, who casts upon him a glance fraught with many meanings.

'Certainly not,' she says, in answer to the question. 'It is only Tommy. Tommy Paulyn, you know.'

'Why, yes, certainly,' says Mrs. Billy, beaming upon the Hon. Tommy, and holding out to him a friendly hand. 'When did you come, eh? I seem to have known you for centuries, the girls told so much about you.'

'The girls' look scornful—Tommy grins.

'They would, you know——' he says, giving his shirt collar a conceited pull. 'They are so fond of me.'

Mrs. Daryl laughs.

'Isn't it true, Angelica?' persists Mr. Paulyn, undaunted by the dark looks cast on him by that sedate maiden. '*Don't* you love me?'

'Have I said so, Tommy?' asks she in her quaint, quakerish fashion.

'A thousand times,' replies he.

'I will not contradict you. I leave it to your conscience!' says the slim, tall, childish little thing, with a lovely reproach in her steady eyes.

'You leave it in safe quarters then,' declares the irrepressible Tommy, who seems to find a special joy in teasing her. 'You have named as umpire in this case about the best thing of its kind. Don't mind her, Mrs. Daryl, she adores me. Come over here, Angelica, and sit beside me. I have a whole budget of news to open to you.'

He backs towards a sofa as he speaks—a patriarchal piece of furniture that has been in the family for generations.

'No, I will not,' says Angelica, with all the sweet, cold sternness of a child. 'You have not said what's true—I will not go near you.'

'Then you'll be sorry presently,' says Mr. Paulyn, with conviction. 'When I'm gone! I shall only be here for a week or so, at the farthest, and who knows when you will see me again!' Here he seats himself heavily upon the ancient sofa, which creaks aloud in an expiring agony, Tommy being no small weight. 'I'm a bird of passage, you know; here to-day and gone——'

The word 'to-morrow' is squealed out in a stifled tone, the old sofa having given way beneath him and buried him amongst its ruins. In his exit Mr. Paulyn may be said to have surpassed himself, naught of him being left to the admiring audience save a pair of perfectly appointed legs. Heels up, the Hon. Tommy disappears from view.

But these heels being discovered a little later on to be full of animation, and indeed kicking vigorously, the unhappy victim of a sofa's weakness is once more hauled into sight by those around.

'Well, I'm da—— I'm blo—— Oh, *confound it!*' gasps he, growing irritable over his inability to give way to naughty language in the presence of the girls. 'What the dooce is the good of a sofa like that, eh? Regular mantrap, what? I'll take jolly good care I don't trust myself to its tender mercies again.'

'You *have* taken care,' cries Margery, who is roaring with laughter. 'It's in bits, poor old thing! And such an old friend as it was, too! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Tommy.'

'Well, I'm not,' says Tommy, and then he joins in with the majority and laughs perhaps the loudest of them all at his mishap. Even Mr. Bellew has been so far impressed by the scene as to forget his wrongs and give way to moody mirth; but now, recollecting himself, goes he back once more to gloom, and the shadow of the window curtains.

'Are you staying at Branksmere?' asks Dick. 'Muriel said something about your coming.'

'Yes, at Branksmere. Fine old place. By-the-by,' glancing round him confidentially, and evidently accepting Mrs. Billy as a confidante upon the spot, 'I never saw anything so awful as Muriel is looking! Like a handsome ghost. White as paper, don't you know, and her eyes as big as a pond.'

'Elegant description!' murmurs Dick admiringly. 'Been getting it up, Tommy.'

'She regular frightened me, I can tell you. I used to be spoony about that girl,' confesses Mr. Paulyn in a loud, clear voice. 'I loved her like—like—well, like anything you know; and now to find her so pale and—and *still*, rather took it out of me. Somebody ought to see to it, you know. Branksmere must be treating her very queer to bring her to such a pass. I can't get her out of my head,' declares Mr. Paulyn earnestly. 'Kept dreamin' of her all last night.'

'You're in love with her still,' laughs Mrs. Billy gaily; 'that's what's the matter with you.' She has caught a nervous light in Margery's eyes, and thus comes to her support and comfort.

'Not a bit of it,' says Tommy stoutly. 'Only she worries

me. She's as good as my sister, you know. In fact, all the girls here make up the only idea of home I've ever known. And I'm certain Muriel——'

'Is quite happy,' interrupts Margery decisively, her face a little pale. 'Why, what silly notion have you got into your head now? Is Muriel never to have a headache—never to look pale? Is she such a favourite of the gods that all the ills of life are to be held back from her?'

'What I want to know is,' says Mr. Paulyn, who is hopelessly unimpressed by this eager defence, 'why she married Branksmere. He's a good old chap enough, and I really like him, but there was that other fellow, Staines; he's staying there now, by the way—dooood bad taste of him, I think—well! she was going to marry him a while ago, eh?'

'I'm jolly glad she didn't,' says Dick.

'So am I,' supplements Angelica. 'Dancing master sort of man!'

'She married Branksmere because she chose to do so,' declares Margery slowly. 'Who shall arrange for her her reasons?'

'Not I for one,' says Tommy. 'But——'

'You will understand that there are to be no "buts" in this case,' interrupts Margery suddenly, with a little flash of anger. 'I will not have Muriel's motives publicly canvassed. Do you hear?' Her eyes are bright, her lips tremulous.

'Ah! I've discovered it,' cries Mrs. Billy at this uncertain moment, with the brisk air of one who has at last achieved a victory over a treacherous memory.

'What?' asks Angelica eagerly.

'What it was I was going to say to Meg when first I came into the room. It escaped me then, but now I have it—recaptured. Margery, a word with you.'

She draws Meg aside, out of hearing, out of the late discussion altogether, and, whatever she says to her, in a minute or two the angry flush fades from the girl's face, and she grows calm again if still a little sad.

As for Tommy, he is left upon the field in a distinctly injured frame of mind.

'It is an odd thing if I can't discuss the girls' well-being amongst themselves,' he protests indignantly. 'It's all very fine their pretending to be so independent, but I'm their cousin, and a sort of a guardian, by Jove! In fact, I feel as if they were all flung upon my shoulders now, somehow.'

Billy is, of course, too much taken up with his late purchase to see anything beyond his nose, and Peter' (mildly) 'is about the biggest fool I know!'

At this one of the twins bursts into a fit of inextinguishable laughter. So pure, so jolly it is, that perforce most of the others chime in with it. Mr. Paulyn, however, regards the outburst with a grave eye.

'That child's not well,' he says slowly. 'Somebody had better look to it. If that severe paroxysm continues much longer I wouldn't answer for the consequences.'

'What is it May, Blanche?' asks Dick, who generally addresses each of the twins by both their names, so as to make sure of them. But May is still beyond speech.

'Pat her on the back, somebody, mildly but firmly,' entreats Mr. Paulyn generally, shifting his glass from his right to his left eye. 'Give it her strong. Now then, my poor child. Better, eh? Well enough to explain?'

'It's only this,' cries May, with a faint relapse into her explosivestate, 'that what you just now said of Peter is exactly what he said of you yesterday, that you were the "biggest fool unhung." That was how *he* put it.'

'Ah! an improvement on my little speech,' declares Mr. Paulyn unmoved. 'Peter, if a little wanting, is still a specially nice fellow, and to think me the biggest fool unhung only proves the truth of my opinion of him. You agree with me, Bellew?' dragging into the foreground the morose young man amongst the window curtains.

'Do I?' says he, in a tone that warns Mr. Paulyn it will be unsafe to follow up the argument.

'What is the matter with you this morning, Curzon?' asks Margery, who has again joined the throng. 'You look to me so sour that I shouldn't think you would agree with anyone.'

'I don't want to,' returns Mr. Bellew, with unwonted force. His wrongs burn within him, and his anger waxes warm.

'Lucky you! as matters stand.'

'I wonder you have the hardihood even to address me,' breaks out he in a vehement undertone, -his wrath at last getting the better of him. He does not wait for her answer to this, but turns abruptly aside, leaving her amazed and indignant, and, in fact, as she whispers to herself, with a good deal 'in for him!'

CHAPTER XVI.

Frowning they went.

MRS. BILLY is still laughing over May's revelation of Peter.

'Poor Peter,' she is saying, 'what a shame to betray him ! He certainly does say funny things at times.'

'Not so funny as Dick,' breaks in Blanche airily, who thinks she sees her way to creating a sensation at least equal to May's. 'He told us all about *you* before you came. But I don't think he could have known, because what he said wasn't a bit like you.'

'What did he say? Was it too flattering a picture he drew?' asks Wilhelmina, laughing again.

'Blanche!' calls out Dick, who has grown very red. 'Go fetch me my fishing rod from the den, and I'll go and get you some trout for your breakfast to-morrow.'

'Not until you have given me Dick's portrait of me, drawn from his inner consciousness,' says Mrs. Daryl mischievously. 'Now begin. I was——'

'Tall—very—*very* big,' nods the child solemnly. 'And you are quite little after all. He said, too, that you would be a dreadful woman—a sort of an Orson! and that you would——'

'Blanche!——' in an agony from Dick.

'You would *hate* little girls like me and May, and go about the farm all day in topboots and leggings. You *wouldn't* like leggings, would you now?'

'No, no,' assents Mrs. Billy.

'And he said you would always carry a cart-whip with you, to strike the farm people with, just like Legree, and Sambo, and Quimbo—rec'lect?'

'Perfectly. Oh, Dick! and so that was what you thought of me. Say, Billy!' accosting Mr. Daryl, who has suddenly appeared in the doorway. 'A fetching description, wasn't it?'

'I'd have known it anywhere,' says Daryl, who is now shaking hands with and welcoming Tommy. 'Staying with Muriel, eh?' he asks.

'I'll tell you something,' says Blanche, who is busy adorning all Wilhelmina's buttonholes with primroses. 'Muriel

isn't a bit like the rest of us. Is she now? When she gets in a rage——'

'Which is about once in a blue moon,' interposes Angelica.

'She never stamps, or fumes, or boxes people's ears as Meg does——'

Here everybody laughs involuntarily.

'As anybody would do,' corrects Blanche, with a penitent glance at Margery. 'She only stands straight up, like *this*,' drawing up her little fat body into an absurd attempt at dignity. 'And opens her eyes wide, like *this*, and fastens up her fingers, so! It is terrifying!—I can tell you,' with a salient nod and the expressive little shrug of the shoulders that is an heirloom in the Daryl family. 'We never vexed Muriel if we could help ourselves.'

'Muriel was clever, it seems to me,' exclaims Mrs. Billy. 'I wish you to understand, Billy, that now, at last, I know the way to manage *you*. The wisdom of babes is astounding. When next you give me a bad time *I* shall be terrifying. Blanche has just shown me how I shall draw myself up, so,' throwing herself into a pretty but exaggerated position, 'and open my eyes, so; and close my fingers upon you, so,' giving him a dainty little pinch, 'and then you'll be done for in no time!' She looks so bright, so gay, so replete with honest life, so defiant, yet so loving withal, that Billy must be forgiven for resorting to instant measures for the reducing of her to order. He gives her first a sound shake and then a sound kiss.

'And that's what *I'll* do!' says he.

'Billy, what a barbarian you are!' cries she, blushing hotly at this breach of etiquette, but as they are all enjoying her discomfiture, she gives up expostulation, and presently her laugh is the clearest and merriest amongst them.

'Pity the ball next Thursday isn't a fancy one,' says Angelica. 'You could manage to look a part, I am sure. As a rule, I am told, the Madame Favarts look like Joan of Arcs, and the Marie Stuarts like Serpolettes. That must rather destroy the effect.'

'What are you going to wear, Meg?' asks Tommy Paulyn.

'Nothing.'

'"Nothing?" My dear girl, consider. We are advanced enough in all conscience, but——there still is a line!'

'I'm not going,' says Miss Daryl. 'That is what I mean.'

'Not going?'

'No. The fact is, I haven't a gown,' declares Margery bluntly, disdaining subterfuge, and secure in the thought that it is too late for anyone touched by her state to order one for her.

'Nonsense, Meg,' cries Mrs. Daryl sharply. 'Of course you are going. Why, your gown came half an hour ago by the mid-day train. I'm wool-gathering to-day. That is another thing I forgot to tell you. It is upsta——'

But there is no longer a Margery to address. Miss Daryl has flown from the room, and presently returns to them with a mystic mass of tulle and lace carried reverently between her outstretched arms.

'Ah! Willy, what can I say?' whispers she, tears in her soft eyes.

'Why, you little pretty goose! Did you think I could enjoy myself without you? It is all selfishness,' smiles Wilhelmina.

'There is Peter!' cries Margery presently in an excited tone (they have all gone into raptures over Worth's last triumph by this time). 'He is coming across the lawn. He must see it too.' She runs to the window and waves her handkerchief with frantic grace.

'Peter! Peter! Peter Pi—i—i—per,' calls she gaily. At last he hears her, and leisurely (being ignorant of the greatness of the occasion) crosses the lawn lower down and comes up to her.

'Why on earth can't you hurry yourself?' cries she.

'The day is long—and patience is a virtue to be cultivated!'

'Perhaps,' ironically, 'you think *you* have it.'

'I *know* I have it.'

'Poof! How men deceive themselves:

Patience is a virtue,

Catch it if you can;

It is seldom in a woman.

But never—never—NEVER in a man!

However, don't mind that, Peter! Come in until I show you my new gown that Willy has given me. Isn't it a beauty—a lovely thing?'

'It is indeed a charming dress,' says Peter, looking at Wilhelmina as gratefully as though the gift to this his favourite sister had been made to himself.

'Where is Curzon?' he asks presently. 'I thought he was here.'

At this they all look round.

'He certainly was here a minute or two ago,' says Dick, who has been heaping ashes on his head ever since Blanche's disclosure, but now thinks it better to assert himself, if only to see how the land lies.

'He went away,' says little May blandly; 'he was cross with Meg, and I think he didn't like Willy to give her the pretty new frock, because the moment he saw it he went out of the window.' Oh! terrible eyes of infancy—what smallest mood escapes you! Margery feels that the gaze of those assembled is by this untoward speech fastened expectantly upon her.

'I think he was vexed about something,' she stammers. 'But I don't know what it was.'

'He is walking up and down the garden,' cries Blanche, who has been peeping round the window. 'He has his eyes,' excitedly, 'glued to the ground. I'm sure, I'm *certain*, he is looking for cockroaches!'

'Looking for a reason for his ill-temper more likely,' says Margery disdainfully.

'Go and find him, and have it out,' says Mr. Paulyn good-naturedly.

'Why should I? One would think it was a *tooth* you were talking about!' returns Miss Daryl indignantly. 'Go and have it out with him yourself. He was looking daggers at you all the time he was indoors. What have I got to do with him?'

'I leave your own innate sense of truth to answer that question, Margaret,' says Mr. Paulyn solemnly.

'No, you don't,' wrathfully, 'you want to answer it yourself. It is a most extraordinary thing, Tommy, that you *will* interfere in the affairs of other people.'

'It is my opinion that you have had a right down flare-up with him,' says the Hon. Tommy unabashed.

'Do you really think, after *all* your experience, that such an opinion as yours is of any consequence at all?'

'A reg'lar shindy,' persists Mr. Paulyn, untouched by this scathing remark.

'Pshaw!' exclaims she, in an accent of unmixed scorn, and stepping through the southern window may be seen presently marching off in the direction of the wood, a route that will convey her far from the garden made obnoxious by Mr. Bellew's presence.

She is hardly gone upon her solitary journey when the upper window is darkened by the incoming form of that moody young man. He looks forlorn and crestfallen, and altogether out of it, as one might say. He comes awkwardly in, and gazes eagerly, but somewhat shamefacedly, around, and then looks distinctly blank.

‘Looking for Margery?’ asks Peter blithely.

‘No, Oh no,’ returns Bellew, with a miserable attempt at a lie.

‘If you are,’ insists Peter, with a noble disregard of this feeble assertion, ‘you’ll find her in the beech wood.’

‘She has only just gone,’ puts in Mr. Paulyn, with an encouraging air. ‘The trail is still fresh. If you hurry you’ll catch it.’

‘I’ll catch it, anyway,’ returns Mr. Bellew darkly, as with a gloomy eye he drops once more on to the verandah and turns his footsteps in the track of his false love.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Spring half raised her drowsy head

Besprent with drifted snow,

‘I’ll send an April day,’ she said,

‘To lands of wintry woe.’

He came—the winter’s overthrow—

With showers that sing and shine,

Pied daisies round your path to strow,

To be your Valentine.

.

It is now close upon noon. In the wood a sombre light, sweet and delicate, is playing upon the opening buds and the greening branches. Through the heavy fir-trees the sun is glinting, making warm patches of colour upon the mossy sward. The dells and smoother bits of grass are gay with primroses and daffodils, and one tiny hillock over yonder is an actual white and purple glory of hyacinths and blue bells. There are touches of coming summer in all the air, in the widening leaves, the dancing rays, the warm, springy feeling of the turf beneath one’s feet.

The song of thrush and linnet greets one from every bough. The sky is blue as blue can be; the soft grey feathery buds in the hedgerows are growing fat; earth hath—

Put forth a thousand sudden flowers
To spread a couch,

and a languorous wind makes plaintive music in the beech-grove below.

The pale dog-violets have all burst out a-flowering, and already the meadows are gay with marguerites, white and yellow. But the finest flower amongst them all is the fair, pensive maiden, with lily drooping head, who steps between them with a careless grace, and crossing the brilliant meads enters the cool, dark woods beyond.

She is not singing, as is her wont; but goes, with bent head, and with lips mute and half-saddened, and with lowered lids. Swiftly, too, she goes—not lingering to gaze with loving eyes at each fresh-born wonder at her feet, or to drink in more deeply the full ecstasy of the air, or to hearken to the glad oratorios the birds are giving in the mystic recesses of the wood, but hastening always as though to escape from her very self.

Perhaps it is sometimes easier to escape from one's self than from a determined lover. This thought occurs to Margery, when, happening to glance back through the thickening foliage, she sees Mr. Bellew afar off, plainly in hot pursuit of her. It may be that she is not altogether displeased with this discovery, because, though she shrugs her shoulders with a disdain that terrifies a simple robin chirping on a bush near by, she still smiles, as if involuntarily, and a little gratified expression, full of vanity satisfied, curves her red lips.

She takes no outward heed, however, of the oncomer, but pursues her way as though his near approach is a thing unknown to her. There are, indeed (if the truth be told), a good many little ways about Miss Daryl that might seem to the uninitiated genuine and guileless in the extreme, but that in reality are disgracefully false, and meant only for the discomfiture (and sometimes for the total annihilation) of those whose greatest fault lies in the fact of their loving her too well! It must be admitted that her admirers lead but a sorry life of it. She can take them up so easily, and, alas! let them down so easily again when they grow tiresome, that their short spells of joy are as a rule but matters for commiseration. To her it is possible to be sweet, petulant, coy, cruel, almost in a breath. Indeed, to follow out her manoeuvres, even for a day, would be to some people a useful study.

Now, having arrived at a spot that appears to her to be good for the inevitable interview with Bellew, she takes up a position so full of melancholy that the young man, drawing every moment nearer, is almost crushed by it. She is leaning in a mournful attitude against a huge fir-tree, with her shapely head thrown well back against the bark of it, and her gaze uplifted in pensive thought to the azure heavens above. There is a sense of injury about her lips, and her eyes are still angry. Mr. Bellew's heart dies within him. Be she ever so guilty it is terrible to him that she should look like this!

A crackling of the dry leaves beneath his feet gives her the chance of being aware of his presence. Slowly, *very* slowly, she turns upon him two lovely, wrathful eyes, and fixes him with a reproachful stare.

'Is no place safe from you?' she demands, in an icy tone. 'Am I *never* to be alone? I wonder, after all the cruelty you have shown me, you have the—the *hardihood*'—with a swiftly malicious glance at him from under her long lashes—'to approach me.'

'I wish I had not said that,' says the young man humbly. 'It was an odious word. How could I have used it when speaking to you! But——' He looks at her.

'But what?' imperiously.

'Margery! think how I saw you first to-day.'

'How you saw me? In this old gown! To which, if you are not accustomed, you ought to be.'

'It is a lovely gown, and you look lovely in it,' says Curzon gloomily. 'But it has nothing to do with it. When I came in through the window you were sitting on that fellow's——' Here he stops short as if choking for a moment or two, and then bursts out again—'*knee!*' he cries vehemently, as though the hateful word has been blown out of him.

'So *that* is it?' says Miss Daryl, regarding him contemptuously. 'All the vile temper you displayed this morning arose out of the fact that I sat on Tommy Paulyn's knee!' A little irrepressible laugh breaks from her, but she stifles it sternly. No! she will *not* give way to frivolity on this occasion. His manner is altogether too abominable! 'You might as well find fault with me for sitting on Billy's or Peter's knee,' she goes on scornfully. 'It would be quite the same thing, I assure you, except that I should prefer Billy,

he wouldn't jig one so. So that's all the excuse you can give for your base conduct? Have you taken leave of your senses?'

'No,' says Mr. Bellew, his eyes on the ground; 'my senses are with me now, as then. They were *all* with me when I saw you *kiss* him!'

'Is there anything strange in that? I have kissed him since I was so high,' pointing to about an inch or so from the ground. 'You forget he is an old, old friend.'

'So am I, yet you have never——'

'I should think not, indeed. You will be good enough to remember that *he* is my cousin.'

'One can marry a cousin!' puts in Mr. Bellew irrelevantly, but with the deepest anguish. It melts her for the moment.

'Well,' she says impatiently, 'I'm not going to marry Tommy, if that is what you mean.'

'If,' looking up eagerly, 'I could be *sure* of that!' A little glow of hope comes into his face.

'Or anyone else, for that matter!'

As she finishes her speech the glow fades, and he grows pale again, but a touch of determination comes into his handsome eyes.

'Look here!' he says, gazing straight at her. 'If you are not going to marry him—are you going to marry me? I want to get an answer to that question now.'

'It is a pity, Curzon,' remarks Miss Daryl, with a slight frown, 'that you will permit yourself such brusqueness of demeanour. It is very distressing! Your manner is positively *farouche* at times; it quite takes one's breath away.'

'Answer me,' says Curzon obstinately.

'Your asking me now suggests to me the possibility that you are very desirous of getting "no" for your answer,' replies Miss Daryl, with a stern glance. 'After your dreadful behaviour of this morning, I wonder you have the "*hardi*——"'

'Is that wretched word to be remembered *for ever*?' interrupts he desperately. 'Good Heavens! how I wish it had never been coined. Think how seldom I offend you, and don't follow up this one sin to its death. To *my* death, I verily believe it will be,' winds he up, with a groan.

'Seldom?' repeats she. 'How little you understand yourself! In my opinion you are the most offending man I know.'

'You are talking nonsense!' says Bellew indignantly. 'I am your slave, as all the world knows. It *ought*'—bitterly—'it can see daily for itself how abject is my submission.'

'I don't *want* a slave!' declares she, with an angry glance suggestive of tears. 'It is very rude of you to suppose so. Am I a South American planter? And to talk of slaves! If you called yourself Mrs. Amyot's *shadow*—you would be nearer the mark!'

'Stuff!' says Mr. Bellew, more forcibly than elegantly. 'You don't believe a word of that. And if I were in love with her, it would only serve you right. We might be quits then.'

'Why? I haven't fallen in love with anyone in a hopelessly idiotic manner, have I? And as for "serving me right" (whatever that remarkable speech may mean), why, if you think it would distress me, your falling in love with *any* one, you are immensely mistaken, and I would advise you to dispel from your mind at once all such illusions.'

This speech seems to Bellew to herald the end of all things.

'You are cruel beyond imagination,' he says slowly. 'I hate a heartless woman.'

'So do I. For once we are agreed. That is why I take care never to part with mine.'

'One must possess a thing to be in a position to part with it.'

'True, oh king!'

'Have you a heart at all?'

'Have you?'

'Who should answer that question but you—you, who possess it?'

'Poof!' says she contemptuously, 'you are but a poor reasoner; a moment ago you doubted my having such an unsatisfactory article, and now you accuse me of having misappropriated yours. How is one to grasp your meaning?'

'We are talking nonsense,' declares the young man angrily. 'We shall be quarrelling soon.' There is no irony intended in this remark, though it might reasonably be supposed by an impartial listener to be full of it.

'I never quarrel,' declares she superbly, uptilting her charming nose, 'except with the boys. They like it, so I do it with them out of sheer good nature. But otherwise——' She shrugs her shoulders.

'Perhaps you think I like it, too?'

'I have told you already that I should not dream of quarrelling with you; and as for *thinking* about you'—disdainfully—'I never do that.'

'You are a shameless coquette!' exclaims Mr. Bellew, driven to desperation and bad language by this cruel assertion.

Silence! A terrible silence! No woman, if born a coquette, likes to be called so. Most women, who couldn't be coquettish to save their lives, are delighted if you will call them so. Miss Daryl belonging to the first class is now hopelessly offended. She turns deliberately away from Curzon, and clasping her hands behind her back commences an exhaustive survey of the landscape.

It is a rich picture that spreads itself before her. The Manor woods, though hardly extensive, are in themselves lovely, and beyond, adjoining them to the east, are the forests of Branksmere—the glowing heights and hollows now rich with bursting verdure. Down, far away beneath her, is the little leafy dell where Muriel had lingered on the first night of her return home, to let wild thoughts of a lost past grow warm within her breast; dangerous thoughts, treacherous, vain, that would have been better buried out of sight, and killed for want of feeding.

To Margery this pretty, innocent-looking spot seems full of sadness. Reticent as Muriel by nature was, and is, still the younger sister had known much of her love affair with Captain Staines—had known amongst other things that this sheltered hollow was the trysting-place of the lovers—a place to be avoided by *her*—Margery—all last autumn, as being sacred to them alone.

She almost forgets Curzon now, as her eyes dwell upon it, and unconsciously she sighs audibly. This resigned expression of a hidden grief is misconstrued by her companion, and compels him to speech.

'I think I am the most unfortunate man on earth,' he begins, with amazing calmness, considering the nature of his statement. Doubtless it is the calmness that savours of despair. 'I have offended you twice to-day.' Both these remarks being positive assertions, delivered in a tone that admits of no argument, Miss Daryl very wisely declines to combat them.

Her continued silence is more than Mr. Bellew has strength to endure.

‘Meg!’ he says, in a voice replete with misery and contrition. His face so exactly corresponds with his voice that Margery relents in so far that she permits herself to be instantly down upon him.

‘Now, once for all!’ she declares, ‘I won’t be called by that name again. Meg! It is monstrous! It reminds me of nothing on earth save a goat! and that hateful nursery rhyme the boys used to drum into my ears long ago—

Meg-a-geg-geg,
Let go my leg.

Now, remember! for the future I forbid you so to address me.’

‘Margery, then,’ meekly.

‘Certainly not.

See-saw, Margery-daw.

That is, if possible, worse. Do you think I am without feeling that you so seek to annoy me? I wish I had had the transporting of my god-parents.’

‘I will call you by any name you choose,’ declares he submissively.

‘Margaret, then. There is something respectable about that. No flippancy, no vulgar rhymes are connected with it.’

‘I am glad to know at last what pleases you, Margaret,’ returns he evenly, his gaze rivetted upon the turf at his feet. If he dared he would have liked to smile, but such a luxury, he feels, is at this moment forbidden him. He therefore contents himself with staring rigidly at a tuft of grass that in reality possesses for him no sort of interest at all, and would have been called by him a shabby bit of verdure had he given it a thought.

‘You are longing to say something,’ says Miss Daryl at last, who has been regarding him with profound displeasure for at least two minutes. ‘Why don’t you do it?’

‘You are right. I want to tell you how glad I am that you have at last made up your mind to go to the county ball.’

‘Willy made it up for me, you mean. Don’t mix matters.’

‘And to-morrow you are going to Sir Mutius Mumm’s afternoon?’

‘I suppose so. All the world is to be there, and one should at least patronise one’s uncle.’

Bellew is quite aware that she has not as yet forgiven him

by the little petulant fashion in which she keeps her head turned away and directed to that grassy rendezvous that once had been so dear to Muriel. His eyes follow hers, and grow a little wider as they rest on a solitary figure—a woman's figure—that slowly and wearily enters it, and sinks in a dejected attitude upon a mossy throne that decorates its nearest side. It is not long a solitary figure! Even as they both gaze spell-bound at it a man steps lightly from the brushwood outside and advances towards it. There is a suggestion of surprise in the way the first tall, graceful form rises to receive this last comer, and then Bellew, as if aware that Margery has grown deadly pale (though her back is turned to him) and that she would gladly believe herself sole witness of this vague scene beneath her, turns abruptly away and concentrates his gaze on the Branksmere turrets that are rising grey and ivied through the swelling trees.

In a very little while, in a moment as it were, he feels the light touch of her hand upon his arm. Though light still, it is heavier than usual, and, being the true lover that he is, he feels a sense of pain thrill through him that runs from her to him. She is very white, and her eyes have a strange gleam in them. She has evidently altogether forgotten that there was any disagreement between them.

'Take me home, Curzon,' she says faintly. 'I am tired; *deadly* tired.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

Some men are of a very cheerful disposition, and God forbid that all such should be condemned for lightness.

LAST night was full of tears, but now the sad reign of weeping is at an end, and the passionate storm that raged in the dark, small hours has left no trace on the smiling earth, save the sweet shedding of white blossoms on the garden paths. Great Pluvius has sunk to rest, and Diespater, Father of Day, has arisen, in all his might, clad about with glorious sunbeams and glad with the breath of many flowers.

The tennis courts without are thronged with guests; the halls, the corridors, the vestibules are all full of them; and Miss Mumm, standing stiff and starchy in her drawing-room to receive the late arrivals, with her small curls hanging

crisply on either side of her pursed-up mouth, is full of importance and, in a degree, more unapproachable than usual.

The room that acknowledges her presence is in every way worthy of her, with its square stiff ottomans, its gilt chairs covered with priceless tapestry, its heavily-moulded cornices, and the general air of unbending propriety that characterises it. It is a last century room, not without its charm if viewed in a certain light—a room in which stately minuets and graceful gavottes might have been treaded in ancient days by dead and gone folk who thought more of snuff than morality, and who saw greater glory in the successful achievement of an intrigue than in the conquering of a kingdom; people who simpered and lisped in flowered sacques and powdered wigs, in lace ruffles and high-heeled shoes, and got through life with the help of an epigram or two, and a perpetual shower of wearisome and carefully prepared but strictly impromptu (?) *bons mots*.

Miss Mumm is holding forth in her usual dictatorial style to old Lady Primrose about Muriel, who, it appears, after all, has disappointed her expectations in many ways. Old Lady Primrose is feebly entering a protest here and there, and is looking a little distressed, which is only natural, the person attacked being her hostess.

‘She *may* be good!’ Miss Mumm is saying in between her greetings to the wife of the local practitioner and the Hon. Mrs. Hornblower, which differ widely in texture. ‘She *may* be; I’m her aunt and should know. And she may be charming, too, as you say,’ with heavy and damning emphasis upon the ‘*may*.’ ‘But I fear she is *careless*. I have noticed many little defects in her; many leanings towards the frivolous side of life; much desire for riotous living. Yes, she is careless. I fear she won’t *do*.’ Here Lady Primrose, who is deafier than ever to-day, grows very mixed, and begins to think she has gone a good deal wrong in her understanding of Miss Mumm’s discourse, and that she is alluding not to her niece, Lady Branksmere, but to some incompetent upper housemaid.

‘You are alluding to——?’ she asks uncertainly, an anxious frown upon her furrowed brow.

‘Why, to Muriel—Lady Branksmere. Can’t you follow me?’ shouts Miss Mumm, as loud as decency will permit.

‘Of course, of course. I can hear you. I beg you will not distress yourself like that. One would think I was deaf,’ says the old lady irritably.

'She has got no stamina,' goes on Miss Mumm. 'She's all for glow and glitter; solid worth is of no account in her eyes. For example, look at the improvements she is organising up at the Castle. She has thrown up a few earthworks and calls 'em terraces. Terraces, forsooth! and to manage that, she takes away the walk beneath the arbutus trees that *always* was there—even in the days of the old man's grandfather, I'm told.'

'So I've heard! So I've heard! Threw up everything, an' went off with her in a postchaise,' mumbles Lady Primrose, who is now dreadfully at sea again. Fortunately she is not 'understanded of' Miss Mumm, who pursues her way unchecked by doubts.

'The avenue in itself would tell a tale. I was driving up there yesterday, and saw weeds—positively weeds—growing at the sides of it. I stopped the carriage, got out, and counted twenty! With me, seeing is believing; I take nothing on hearsay; but I counted those weeds with my own eyes. Now, weeds are as pushing as *parvenus*, and, like them, should be eradicated!'

'Quite right, quite right. Have no sympathy with Radicals myself; can't endure 'em,' quavers the older woman, shaking her head in a palsied fashion.

'Why should weeds be found upon her avenue at all?' continues Miss Mumm, who is now mounted on her hobby, and rides away again without hearing the ramblings of Lady Primrose. 'Of course, if one's servants are not looked after, what can you expect? If I had forty—as I believe that silly young woman really has—I should keep my eye on every one of them. They will do nothing, I have learned from sad experience, unless the mistress is after their tails morning, noon, and night. Now, weeds, they will take *no* trouble about. Off they whisk the heads, leaving the roots behind them; whereas if one hopes to keep their place decent, they must be got out of the ground, root and branch.'

'Ay, ay. Root 'em out. Root 'em out!' gabbles the old lady with senile enthusiasm. 'Lord Foozil thinks with *you*. They shouldn't be allowed to live,' with a wild cackle. 'That's what *he* says;' cuck—cuck.

'Eh?' says Miss Mumm, staring at her with sudden suspicion.

'They shouldn't have a vote if he had *his* way. It's monstrous how they're spreading. Country's going to per-

dition. That's what *he* says. Clever fellow, Foozil! Eh? eh?'

'Pshaw!' exclaims Miss Mumm indignantly, turning on her heel and leaving the old lady still cackling and mumbling contentedly over her Radicals.

Outside, the gardens—being in unison with the furniture within—are simply exquisite. Give me an old-world garden full of sweets and careless grace to all the stiff ribbon borders and stereotyped modern beds in the world. Here the tall, trimly-clipped yew hedge conceals a pleasaunce made gay with flowers of a century ago, and the gaudy hues of the strutting peacocks who walk in stately fashion to each new-comer to demand the customary toll of bread or biscuit. The small cries of countless robins fill the air, little, gentle denizens that seem to have adopted this calm retreat as their own special domain, where they may hop about in undisturbed delight on the marble basins of the fountains, and twitter frivolously to their hearts' content from the shoulders of a dismantled Venus or Apollo.

Fair is the season with new leaves,
Bright blooms, green grass,
And cries of plough-time.

The pleasaunce is crowded with gay groups dotted here and there. Through the open windows beyond the wall of rhododendrons come snatches of Mozart and Dussek. From farther still the laughter of the tennis players, and the triumphant cry that tells of a game won. Mrs. Amyot, in a gown of sap-green, is lounging leisurely on a low garden chair, and is holding her court gaily. A little farther on Lady Branksmere, in a marvellous costume of Venetian red, looks like a spot of blood in the assembly; whilst Angelica, leaning on the back of her chair, in a little white nun-like frock, and with a wrapt expression on her face, makes a charming contrast.

'Who is the old man over there?' asks Lord Primrose presently, who is perhaps not so well acquainted with his host as might be termed advisable. Margery, who overhears him, laughs.

'Hush! Mutius Mumm is the word for him,' she whispers mischievously.

'What a name!' says Primrose. 'So that is really your uncle? You do him credit, let me tell you, and I should think he wants all he can get. What's the matter with his head? He doesn't belong to any particular order, does he?'

At this, Margery, Angelica—and Dick, who is lying about somewhere near—give way to appreciative laughter.

‘That bald spot was a thing full of interest to us for years,’ says Margery gaily. ‘We used to make baby bets about it. And every year it grew carefully bigger and bigger! *Such* an old head as he has! First we used to compare his patch to a threepenny bit, then as it increased with our years and his, a fourpenny. Then it became a sixpence, then a shilling, then a florin, and all at once, as it were, it changed into a five-shilling piece! When it came to *that* point it staggered us a good deal, I can tell you; but Tommy’—indicating Mr. Paulyn by a wave of her fan—‘came to the rescue. He surmounted the difficulty. A brilliant thought occurred to him. The first—’

‘Of a long series,’ interrupts Mr. Paulyn modestly, yet with a reproachful glance at her. What had she been going to say? ‘I employed but one letter to effect the desired comparison. It instantly made Sir Mutius’ pate a plate.’

‘A cheese plate,’ supplements Margery. ‘It stayed at that for some time, but now it is a soup-plate. We expect no more from it. We feel it has done its duty.’

‘Why don’t he do something for it?’ demands Primrose, casting an indignant eye through his glass at the distant Sir Mutius. ‘It’s very abominable his going about like that in his skin.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t talk so unguardedly, my dear fellow,’ says Halkett gravely, ‘when you know there are ladies present. It—it’s not *decent*!’

‘Of Sir Mutius? No, that’s what I’m preaching,’ returns Primrose stolidly.

‘What an absurd name it is,’ says Mrs. Amyot laughing. ‘Mutius Mumm. Oh! it is *too* ridiculous!’

‘He and Aunt Selina, as he calls her, are about the most absurd pair in the world.’

‘As for her, she is delicious,’ protests Mrs. Amyot. ‘She is a thing apart—voice, ringlets, and all. It is a pity to lose a bit of her.’

‘You had better make the most of her to-day, then,’ says Margery, ‘because she is off to Shorebank next week early. It is her one idea of travelling, and she does it assiduously every year. In reality Shorebank is about fifty miles from this, but if it were at the Antipodes she could not make a greater fuss than she does about going there.’

'One can understand that. I told you she was delicious,' murmurs Mrs. Amyot.

Mrs. Vyner crossing the sward indolently comes up to her.

'I have been playing tennis,' she says mournfully, with all the air of one who has been sacrificing herself for her country's good.

'Impossible! Why, you look as cool as a snowdrop,' puts in Captain Staines, looking up at her from his lounging position on the grass.

'Do I?' Her tone is of that order of indifference that might be termed insolent.

'A charming compliment,' says Mrs. Amyot, smiling at Staines. Her smile is soft and kindly, she being one of those women who very, *very* seldom frown on any man. 'But as to your playing'—turning to Mrs. Vyner, who has sunk as if exhausted on the seat near her—'who did you get to do it for you?'

'Freddy Trant, of course. You know I never play with anyone else. He does all the serving and takes every ball.'

'Useful boy! And what did you do?'

'I told him how good it was of him,' lisps Mrs. Vyner calmly. 'So it was, I think.'

'I wonder how you managed the standing,' says Halkett. 'Did you lean on Captain Trant, or did you do it alone?'

'Alone I did it,' returns Mrs. Vyner with a sigh. 'It tired me horribly, but no one should live entirely to themselves. Mr. Goldie told us that last Sunday. I've been living to Freddy, and it has brought me to death's door.'

'I dare say you will rally here,' says Lord Primrose; 'the air is very mild.'

'Was there ever so charming a bit of garden?' exclaims Mrs. Amyot, with unaffected enthusiasm. 'It makes one feel so far away from everything. I should like to steal it.'

'As it stands—or without its present occupants?' asks Halkett, in a low tone.

'Without.'

'And not one single exception?'

'One only!' with a tender smile.

'Ah! And that?'

'The Dachshund yonder.'

'Some day you will drive me to suicide,' says Halkett, with a melancholy foreboding.

'Beyond this garden there is another almost equal to it,' cries Margery, throwing a rosebud into Mrs. Amyot's lap to catch her attention. 'Will you come and see it? A year ago it was lovely. It must be lovely still.'

'No, no. I am surfeited with happiness here. I shall not tempt Fate further. You see a strange thing in me—a contented woman! Find another companion in your ramble.'

'Try me, Miss Daryl?' says Captain Staines, springing to his feet. In spite of the gaiety of his air, there is something anxious about it. Some fine instinct tells him that Margery both dislikes and distrusts him, and, for the furtherance of his plans, it seems to him of special importance that he should combat her prejudice.

'Everyone can come,' returns Margery very slowly, regarding him with cold, unfriendly eyes. 'It is but a little place, and I do not think it would suit you. It is nothing but a small wilderness of sweets. It would, I imagine, bore you.'

'You have, I fear, but an indifferent opinion of my artistic tastes,' says Staines, with an affectation of good humour, but a rising colour.

'I *really* do not think,' with gentle insistence, 'that you would care for it. But,' looking round her, 'everyone can come.'

'*Every* one! When I asked your permission to accompany you, I thought, perhaps——'

'Yes?' Her interruption, though quiet, is prompt. 'If you will follow Mr. Bellew and me, you shall see for yourself all the beauties of which I have raved.'

She inclines her head slightly. It is a dismissal, and Staines very wisely takes it as such. Her whole air and manner has raised within him a sense of defiance of all rule and order, and, crossing to where Lady Branksmere is sitting, he takes up his position behind her chair, and murmurs some gay commonplace in her ear. Muriel smiles politely. It is at this moment, when he is leaning over her in a rather *empresé* attitude, and she has turned a little in order to smile up at him, that Lord Branksmere enters the yew garden. His eyes, that always in every assemblage seek for Muriel, now pursue their customary search, and at last rest upon her—and Staines.

A start, so imperceptible as to be only a thrill, runs through him, and a little ashen shade mingles with the natural bronze of his complexion. It is at this moment that Madame von Thirsk slips her hand through his arm.

CHAPTER XIX.

Oh! he has passions which outstrip the wind,
And tear her virtue up, as tempests root the sea

O dreary life, we cry. O dreary life.

‘WHERE have you been, my friend?’ she asks smilingly. ‘This is the cosiest corner to be found anywhere, but doubtless you have been endeavouring to help the old people with their impossibles, according to the good-nature that always distinguishes you. We have all been enjoying ourselves here more than it is possible to conceive in this prosaic age.’

‘So it seems,’ says Branksmere, biting his lip. Involuntarily his glance again seeks his wife’s seat, and an evil fire lights within his sombre eyes.

‘Ah! I warned you of that,’ says Madame, with a sudden little catch of her breath. ‘But you would have none of my counsel.’ She casts her beautiful hands abroad. There is a well-arranged sorrow, and an unutterable pity in her tone. ‘It is not yet too late,’ she whispers eagerly. ‘Get rid of—*him*.’ By an almost imperceptible gesture she indicates Staines, who is still leaning over Muriel. Perhaps she knows her man when she says this.

‘I will drive no one from my doors,’ says Branksmere doggedly. ‘And—you misunderstand me, as I warned you before. It seems to me that you imagine I distrust Lady Branksmere. Believe me, that is not so. Were it the case I should not seek to retain a wife on such terms. I should simply let her go.’ As he says this he turns his dark, inscrutable eyes full on her. ‘But I do *not* distrust. And once for all I forbid you to speak to me again in such a manner.’

There is a suspicion of passion barely subdued in his tone. Madame von Thirsk, hearing it, turns to him a face that has grown curiously white, but is yet full of repressed power.

‘You, too, misunderstand *me*, Branksmere,’ she says, in a low vibrating voice. ‘Am I to be addressed as though I were a common acquaintance after—*all*? Dare I not speak one word of warning? *I*, the friend of ten long years! Am I nothing to you now—*now* that this woman of yesterday has

dragged you into her silken coils that are all so falsely woven?' She clenches her hand. 'Nay, hear me—*hear me!*' she cries aloud, as with a stern determination he moves away. 'If to me ungrateful, still for your *own* sake be wise!' She takes a step towards him, hardly knowing herself what a revelation is on her tongue in this impulsive moment. But he still persistently moves away, and the moment is passed. Another comes, but its fruits are of a different tree. 'Go, then!' she whispers in a tone that is almost a hiss. 'The day will dawn when you *must* listen!'

She sinks back in her seat, and by a supreme effort recovers her self-control. Her blood seems on fire. Lifting her eyes, she brings Staines to her side by an almost imperceptible movement of her fan. By the time he reaches her, her hand is quite steady again, and her voice her slave once more.

'You are a little rash—is it not?' she says to him smilingly, drawing her skirt aside that he may take a seat upon her garden chair. '*Monsieur* can see! Eyes have been given him that are of use, dull as your insular eyes usually are. As we have entered into a little friendly alliance, I think it my duty to warn you.'

'You are an admirable ally.' Looking at her, Staines can see something about her that is not altogether calm. 'Jealous, is he? There is nothing strange in that, after all. Jealousy is not dependent upon love.'

'He thinks of his—*honour!*' returns she, the words coming from her in a sort of snarl. Her eyes are lowered, the blood has forsaken her lips. Staines shrugs his shoulders. After all, if she has serious cause for plaint, it is no affair of his, and will only make her the more useful in the little game he has decided upon playing.

'He behaved honourably enough to—her,' he says, in a subdued voice, gazing right and left with a careless air, that would have deceived the most suspicious watcher. 'I hear the settlements were princely.' There is something distinctly anxious about the glance that accompanies this last remark.

'I only know one thing about them for certain,' replies Madame in a slow tone. 'He has settled a thousand a year upon her, *absolutely*. Nothing could deprive her of that. The twenty thousand was made over on her irrespective of pin-money or anything else, before the marriage. It was not *her* doing, you will mind. It was his.'

'Twenty thousand. Absolutely,' says Staines meditatively. 'A generous arrangement.' A rather amused smile curves his lips beneath his long yellow moustache. 'Because after all one never knows what may happen! You are sure of this?'

'Quite sure. Were she to abuse his confidence to the utmost; were she to commit the one unpardonable sin in married life—it would still be hers. Were she to—— What is your plan?' cries she fiercely, breaking off in the midst of her seemingly calm rejoinder, and growing terribly agitated. 'There is something diabolical in your face. What is your plan, your scheme? Give voice to it!'

'What plan should there be?' demands Staines airily, with a sudden movement of his body that throws up his shoulders and flings out his arm, and expresses generally a half-amused renunciation of the idea. 'You hurt me when you say I look diabolical! Mildness is a prerogative of mine. And would you call *ours* a scheme? There are two people whom we love. They are unhappy. We would rescue them from their bondage—we would lift the chains that drag them down. Do you call that a scheme? If so, it is a pious one.'

'It is a damnable one!' replies the Hungarian coldly. 'I do not defraud myself, if you do.'

'This cold climate is killing your suavity, Madame,' returns he lightly. There is not an iota of compunction in his handsome smiling face.

'Have you no remorse?' demands she. 'No misgivings? No terror of the end?'

'No soul?' supplements he, with an open derision that is an efficient answer to all such questions. He laughs aloud, and delicately flips a little passing speck of air-down from his coat.

Madame's hand tightens on a fold of her gown, and then a laugh breaks from her, too; low, but reckless, and out of tune with all gentle sympathies. At this unpropitious moment she lifts her head and gazes straight before her to where a little picture is being enacted as if for her special benefit.

Branksmere is bending over Muriel's chair. He has evidently said something that is unpalatable, because on the instant Lady Branksmere rises and confronts him. As their eyes meet, Madame can see that a very fury of repressed rage and hatred gleams from the eyes of each. Her laughter grows bolder as she turns her glance away from them back again to Staines.

'You are right,' she says feverishly. 'The present includes all things.' She throws back her handsome head, and her great, lustrous, passionate eyes grow dazzling. 'Your plan?' she asks. 'I am prepared for it now. Let me have it.'

'You accord me powers I don't possess,' returns Staines, with a malicious affectation of modesty. 'I could not formulate a plan to save my life, but I confess to you that I should like to be of service to the woman I love. She is now unhappy. It seems to me her burden is greater than she can bear. Should it so happen that she should elect to let it fall from her—to fly from it with—— Why, then——'

'Yes? Then?' She is leaning towards him, ill-subdued excitement in her whole air.

'Well, then—— By-the-by, Madame,' says he, in his usual pleasant, airy tone, 'permit me to remind you that there are one or two people in this charming little nook besides ourselves, and that perhaps a degree less—shall we call it interest? Yes?—interest in this conversation on your part would be advisable. Ah! that is better. Well "*then*"—was that where I stopped?'

'Yes, yes. Go on,' desires she, with quickened breath.

'*Then* it seems to me that Lord Branksmere might readily sue for and obtain a divorce—and find himself once more in a position to wed—a woman in every way more suited to him.'

His pause is accompanied by a look that says, plainer than words, 'You!' but the word is *not* said nevertheless.

'An admirable plot,' replies Madame, after a moment or two. She has grown very pale. 'But there is such a thing as failure.'

'Is there? I don't believe it,' replies he lightly. 'All I want is a little help: *your* help. If you want a first lesson,' rising as he speaks to let her understand the interview has lasted long enough for safety, 'learn this. She has already done you the honour to be jealous of you.'

He smiles until he shows all his white teeth, makes her a little courteous bow, and strolls away jauntily across the clean-shaven sward. Branksmere has disappeared, and with an air of suppressed melancholy he once again approaches Muriel.

'You look tired,' he says presently, when the man who had been speaking to her has moved away. His tone is full of solicitude, and of that nameless air of mingled reverence and reproach he reserves alone for her.

'My face is for once then an index to my mind. I am tired, bored rather.' She speaks petulantly. The touch of gloomy anger that had despoiled the fairness of her features when Branksmere had spoken to her still lingers.

'Your sister spoke of a little paradise that exists somewhere near this. Will you come and look for it? Exercise will kill your ennui,' suggests he gently.

For a moment she hesitates. Then rising, moves away beside him in the direction of a little iron gate overhung with trailing ivy that leads to some quaint region beyond. In silence they go until the murmur of the voices they left behind grows faint and indistinct, and fades presently into the battle of the tiny rushing streamlet that greets them as they turn a rocky corner.

It is a charming spot they have reached—silent, calm, idyllic. The little river tumbling over its pebbles makes music at their feet.

It madë such a noisë as it ran,
Accordant with the birdës harmony,
Me thought it was the bestë melody
That might be heard of any man.

Muriel, as if wearied, sinks upon a mossy couch, and gazes with half unseeing eyes upon the laughing water. Her heart is full of gall; an angry fire burns within her veins. A sudden wild longing for revenge upon the man who she believes has married her only to dishonour her, is withering every womanly feeling in her heart.

'Your sister was right,' says Staines, seating himself beside her. 'It is a spot worthy of truest admiration.'

'It is a little uncultivated bit of nature,' returns she dryly. 'We are so hedged about, and trimmed and twisted into shape nowadays, that we persuade ourselves a forgotten spot like this is more worthy of regard than it really is. What is it after all?' looking depreciatingly around her. 'A three-cornered affair, decked out with a moss-grown rock, a noisy stream, and a twilight effect caused by a few giant firs in the background. We are so clever, we mortals of to-day, that, given a good man or two with any eye to artistic joinings, I don't see why we should not manufacture just such another picturesque angle in the course of a few weeks.'

'It fails to please you?' regretfully.

'On the contrary, it pleases me very much.'

'It is out of harmony with you, then?'

'It is I who am out of harmony with it ; with most things,' declares she impatiently.

Staines glances at her from under his lowered eyelids. She is looking straight before her as though brooding over some hateful, if distant, thought, and seems lost to all sense of his presence. She has let one of her gloves fall from her—a long, slender, dainty thing, sweet with the impression of the beautiful hand it has covered, and Staines, lifting it from the ground, lays it on his knee, and softly, tenderly smooths out the fingers of it one by one. His manner up to this, if slightly tinged with melancholy, has been prosaic and commonplace in the extreme, but this action of his is replete with all a lover's tenderness.

'I wish I might do something for you,' he says at last.

'For me!' His tone has roused her from her unhappy reverie, and turning she sees him smoothing out the glove's creases with a lingering, worshipful hand. The sight seems to anger her. She frowns impetuously. 'What is it that you could do for me?' she asks, with a touch of hauteur in voice and eyes.

'Many things,' replies he evenly, changing his meaning deftly. 'I could go to the house and get you some Cologne water ; or, if I might be allowed to advise, I could tell you that a little of that cool stream there, if applied to the forehead, would alleviate a bad headache.'

His answer is so entirely different to what she expected, that it not only rouses but relieves her.

'There is no remedy for a really bad one,' accepting his reading of her mood with a sort of inward gratitude. 'It seems to me that mine will endure for ever.' Her laugh is a little dreary. 'That is what all people think when they are in pain, is it not? A mere morbid fancy that dies with the suffering.'

'I do not care to think of you as being either morbid or in pain,' replies Staines in a low tone, without lifting his eyes from the glove he is still slowly caressing. 'And sometimes, of late, I have imagined your mind was troubled.'

'I am not exempt from trouble, if you mean that.'

'I wish I could be of any use to you at all,' says Staines in a matter-of-fact tone, that, considering the situation, is reassuring, and therefore trebly insidious. 'If ever I can help you in any small way, please remember that we are friends, *at least.*'

She makes no direct answer to this, but presently, without removing her gaze from the distant hills, she speaks to him.

‘Already you have helped me,’ she declares gently. ‘It was you who directed my footsteps to this place, and it seems to me to be very good to be here. I feel calmed, rested, in spite of all my slighting words of a few minutes since.’

Her tone has grown somewhat dreamy. She is leaning back against the lichened rock behind her, and a transient glory from the departing sun has settled on her head—her small shapely head with its wealth of bronze-red tresses. Through the leaves of the dense trees the fading beams are piercing, lighting up the strange weird beauty of her face, her deep melancholy eyes and the mournful curves of her sad, haughty lips. Gazing at her and marking the loveliness of her, a curious thrill runs through Staines. If *his* should be the hand to lay that small, proud head low in the dust of shame, what will the dread future hold for him, for her? How will it be between they two in all the long, interminable after years? Again that strange, nervous foreboding oppresses him; that sense of fear that still has nothing in it of honest compunction or growing remorse. It is at an end almost immediately. He shakes it from him with a shrug of self-contempt and turns to her.

‘You like being here, then?’ he asks in a low tone, that seems to fall in naturally with the hour and the scene.

‘It means almost happiness,’ returns she, with a deep sigh. Her voice is still dreamy, absent; her eyes, half hidden by her white, heavy lids, are looking into a tender past, or a future impossibly bright. Then all at once her mood changes. She comes back to her present with a start, and turns a questioning gaze on Staines.

‘Tell me about Madame von Thirsk,’ she says. ‘I saw you talking to her just now. I confess I do not understand her myself, but you probably do. She is a friend of yours?’

‘A friend? No,’ returns Staines promptly. He looks surprised, even a little shocked. ‘I know almost as little of her as you do,’ he goes on slowly. ‘But I think I should distrust—dislike——’ He breaks off abruptly. ‘After all I am scarcely in a position to judge—my knowledge of her—my opinion, is based on such slight grounds that——’

‘That?’ she leans towards him, and Staines rises precipitately to his feet.

‘Why will you press the matter?’ he asks. ‘It is all

mere conjecture. I—a stranger to her and to—— What should I know? And yet if I dared speak—if I dared give voice to the fear within me, I should say—*beware* of Madame von Thirsk!’

‘That is a strange word to use,’ says Lady Branksmere coldly. ‘What should I dread from any mortal thing? You speak in enigmas, and you expect me to follow you. But I cannot.’

‘Perhaps you *will* not!’ His agitation is not altogether feigned; she looks so lovely, yet so entirely alone, that his heart smites him through very pity of her. ‘There are moments,’ he goes on hurriedly, ‘when the truth of all this dawns upon me. When I see you loveless, sad, *forsaken*! Oh, forgive me! The thought is sacrilege, and yet——’ He throws out his hands to her as though in a paroxysm of passion—as though in momentary forgetfulness of the gulf that now divides them. ‘Muriel! *Muriel*!’ he whispers, heart-brokenly.

Lady Branksmere, taking a step forward, moves him aside with an imperious gesture. Her face is the colour of death, but her eyes are brave and unflinching.

‘It is time we returned to the others,’ she says icily. ‘We have been here too long already.’

She sweeps past him, and he follows her without another word. As they regain the crowded *parterre* beyond they come upon a group or two, and Lady Branksmere stopping to accost one of those who help to form them, Staines gets separated from her. From that group she passes to another, oblivious of the fact that she has one bare, white hand, and one black one, until she finds herself suddenly face to face with Branksmere.

‘I am afraid you have lost your glove,’ he says in a low voice that vibrates with a terrible wrath.

Thus addressed Lady Branksmere glances down at her hands, and for the first time becoming aware of her loss, a slow rich crimson dyes her cheeks.

‘I have not lost it. I dare say I shall be able to find it,’ she says, rather uncertainly.

‘Shall I ask Captain Staines to look for it? He was your latest companion. He may know something about it,’ suggests Branksmere, his gaze burning into her.

‘You are very good. But I beg you will not give yourself

so much trouble,' returns she steadily. 'By-and-by I can myself ask him if he has seen it.'

'Do!' The word is a command! It strikes upon Muriel, and sends her glance swiftly to his. Her large eyes, grown luminous in this fast gathering twilight, are uplifted, and Branksmere, studying them with a heart overflowing with bitterest anger, can see that they are filled with an unutterable contempt.

CHAPTER XX.

Doubt is the effect of fear or jealousy,
Two passions which to reason give the lie;
For fear torments and never doth assist,
And jealousy is love lost in a mist;
Both hoodwink truth, and go to blind-man's-buff.

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OLD Lady Primrose, with the prospect of the county ball and its attendant tortures before her for the following evening—tortures, however, she would not have skipped for worlds—has retired to bed, worn out by Miss Mumm's hospitality. Most of the others have followed her example. Mrs. Amyot, indeed, who seldom cries for quarter, is still in the billiard-room having a last game, with Lady Anne Branksmere, who is always good-natured, to keep her in countenance. A good many of the men have already sneaked off to the smoking den, and are now in bliss, otherwise tobacco clouds. Lord Branksmere, opening the library door, is startled to find it not empty as he had supposed, but in occupation by his wife.

She is standing on the hearthrug, with one arm upon the mantel-piece, and a slender foot poised upon the fender-bar. She is gazing into the fire-place, but is evidently lost to all knowledge of the fact that the fire has nearly burned itself out, and that only a few charred and slowly dying embers still remain. Where are her thoughts? How far have they wandered? She looks sad and uncertain, and, it seems to Branksmere, very lonely. Through the room the chill of a night that creeps towards morning may be felt.

'The room is cold,' says Branksmere abruptly. There is a touch of impatient pain in his tone. That little sense of loneliness that seems to hang upon her has hurt him inexpressibly. Going over to the hearthrug, he pokes up the

cinders and draws them together, and begins to pile on the still smoking ruins some wood and coals. Muriel sighs heavily as one might who has been rudely awakened from a sweet dream to an unblessed present.

'Is the room cold? I did not feel it,' she says absently.

Branksmere, laying his fingers lightly over hers, is made aware that they are as cold as death.

'You are shivering,' he declares, and, redoubling his exertions, soon drives the wood into a flame that gives the contagion to its neighbours, and sends a cheerful crackling blaze up the chimney. Muriel, though still absent in manner, seems conscious of the growing warmth and grateful to it; she draws nearer and spreads out her slender hand over the sparkling flame.

'You should remember the summer is still hardly come, and that the nights are cold,' says Branksmere with some concern. He pauses, and then, after a slight struggle with himself, he goes on again: 'I may as well tell you,' he continues, with some difficulty and a considerable amount of awkwardness, 'that I regret the rudeness of my manner towards you this afternoon.'

'Yes!' says Muriel indifferently, as though only half attending. 'I am very sorry you let it worry you. I had forgotten all about it.'

It has been to him so sore a remembrance during all these past hours that he now cannot conquer the feeling of offence her evident carelessness has occasioned him.

'Of course I should not have taken it so for granted that—that—the glove was—in his possession at all,' stammers Branksmere. He is indeed very honestly sorry for the part he had played, and has spent his time since in persuading himself that there was no occasion for him to play it. He has found a genuine pleasure in censuring himself for his hot haste in accusing her of what it was probable she was innocent. True she had changed colour in a strange, nervous fashion, but was not his brusque address sufficient to bring the angry blood to the cheek of any woman? And if it *had* been, as he for that mad, horrible moment believed, would she have had the effrontery to appear before them all with one naked hand to testify, to call attention to her folly? Would a woman court scrutiny on such an occasion? Would she parade her sorry deed; cry out upon the world to look and see? Would she not rather have removed the other glove too, so as to kill

observation? And yet to hear her *say* it was not true! Only to hear her say it. How singularly silent she is. She has made him no answer to his last remark.

'You have got it back?' he asks suddenly, staring at her.

'No. I know as much about it now as I did then.'

'But you asked him about it?' His face has flushed, and though he despises himself for his cowardice, he cannot bring himself to mention Staines' name.

'No,' indifferently. 'I never thought about it since.'

This is the strict truth. Her mind had been so taken up with present humiliations, and tender, past recollections, by wraths of to-day's yielding, and mournful desires of her lost yesterday, that she had fondly but vainly believed to be vanquished, that all remembrance of that luckless glove had slipped away from her.

'I am to understand then that you have made no search for it?' His expression has grown almost forbidding again, and his eyes are dark with passionate suspicion.

'None whatever!' She faces round upon him now with eyes angry as his own. 'A moment ago you gave me to believe that you came here to offer me an apology for conduct that to many women would be unpardonable. Am I now to regard that apology in the light of a clever opening that was to give you the chance of offering me further indignity? Is this generous or just? Can you find no bolder road to your attack than this trivial affair of a glove?'

'Do you call it a trivial affair that breath of dishonour should touch you?'

'Your tone is an insult,' breathes she with flashing eyes. 'I refuse to understand it.'

'You understand it sufficiently when you make me that answer. That my manner should surprise you is absurd. Do you believe it possible that I am the man to look tamely on whilst you——'

'You must be *mad*,' interrupts she, in a low, vehement tone; '*mad*, to speak to me like this! Do you think of nothing? Do you imagine me blind, or a fool? Do you not see whither you are urging me, or,' lifting her hand to her brow with a horrified air, 'is it that you *do* know!—Stand back from me! Do not touch me!' Her horror, her passion has risen to a height. She confronts him with clenched hands and heaving bosom, and a marble face beautiful in its sternness and rigidity.

To Branksmere her rush of words bear but a partial meaning. Of the fact that she suspects his friendship with Madame von Thirsk he is entirely in the dark. If a little calmer, he would assuredly have been struck by the extreme excitement of her manner, but as it is he is still carried along with the tempestuous stream of his own suspicions.

'You tell me then deliberately that you do not know where your glove is?' he demands imperiously.

'I know nothing about it,' returns she, in a stifled tone. Her passion is spent. Despair of her ruined life has again set in; her head sinks, her breath comes in long, sad sighs.

It is at this moment that the door is opened, and Madame von Thirsk comes softly in.

CHAPTER XXI.

Smooth runs the water where the brook is deep.

And many strokes, though with a little axe,
Hew down and fell the hardest timber'd oak.

SHE has evidently been preparing her toilette for the night. Her dinner gown has been cast aside, and instead of it she is now robed in a soft *négligé* costume of pale pink cashmere, half smothered in lace that hangs loosely round her *posée* figure, yet rather suggests than hides it. It trails in pliant folds upon the carpet, and is so far drawn backward that her pretty shoes of white plush can be distinctly seen. A heavy collar of yellow Mechlin lace falls away from her fair, round pillar of a throat, and her dusky hair is coiled upwards into a high knot at the back of her head, that suits to perfection its strictly classical shape. There is a touch of warm, living beauty about her that makes itself felt, and brings Muriel, with an angry sense of rivalry, to a calmer state of mind.

In Madame's hand is a little dainty lamp, of the exquisite Etruscan form, that sends up a lambent flame and illumines and throws out the mystic shadows of her eyes and the purity of her dark pencilled brows. She starts a little on seeing Muriel and Lord Branksmere, as though she had supposed them miles away, and then smiles genially.

'I had no idea there was anyone here,' she begins, with a

careful hesitation that takes the place of the blush she would fain have produced but cannot. 'They told me everyone was in bed, or in the smoking-room, so I stole down here to look for my book. I have mislaid it again. My books'—with a little laugh—'seem to be specially artful. They have acquired a trick of hiding themselves from me. I am always losing them.' She has rattled all this off very gaily.

'You do indeed seem singularly unfortunate in that respect,' returns Lady Branksmere stonily. 'Can I help you to look for it? Is this it?'

'You have found my truant for me? Ah, that is very kind. Do you know I was on my way to your room just now? I did not know that you and your husband——' with a charmingly comprehensive little nod at Branksmere, who is looking black as midnight, 'were enjoying a cosy little *tête-à-tête* here all by yourselves!'

She beams sympathetically upon them both as though to them she is quite *en rapport* with the lover-like sentiments she is so sure they entertain one for the other. She seems happily blind alike to Muriel's cold stare and Branksmere's poorly suppressed ill-temper. Her manner maddens Muriel.

'You wished to see me?' she says in an icy tone, that, however, fails to chill the effervescing Madame.

'For a moment only. To do you a little service; you have done me one,' with a graceful glance at the recovered book, 'now,' playfully, 'I shall recompense you. See!'

She draws out from her pocket the long black glove that Muriel had dropped in that little sylvan retreat where she had passed so tranquil an hour with Staines.

'I have rescued it for you,' cries Madame archly. 'Captain Staines was very unwilling to part with it, let me tell you, but I gained it by strategy. Right triumphed over might *this* time, at all events. I sought my opportunity. I lay in wait, and came off victor in the end.'

Her tone is quite amazingly playful. Even Branksmere might have been struck by the excessive gaiety of it had not his mind been too deeply pierced by other suspicions, born, or rather confirmed, by her words. So, then, Staines had been in possession of the missing glove all along. He had even objected to give it up. By Thekla's own confession she had been obliged to resort to stratagem to rescue it. Who but a lover would set such store by a woman's glove? *A lover!*

His dark eyes grow furious, his lips white. Muriel, then,

had deceived him, not unintentionally, but wilfully. That swift deep crimson blush of hers that has lived in his memory ever since had had its meaning—its *guilt*! It was not as he had tried to believe, the flush of righteous indignation, but the quick colouring of fear. She had, too, purposely misled him; she had assured him she would ask back the glove from Staines, supposing him to have it. But she had not done so. She had perhaps been happy in the thought that something belonging to her was in his possession. Something! Was he not indeed the master of all? Her heart—her soul—the love for which he, her husband, had sought and toiled in vain? Were all things torn aside and the plain truth laid bare, should it not be shown that he, Branksmere, was the usurper, and that other the rightful heir?

His face has grown very grey, and his moustache is twitching in a nervous, excitable way. Madame is still smiling; but her eyes are keen beneath their mask of pleasantry, and her glance travels swiftly from one to the other of those before her.

Muriel, if inwardly a good deal shocked at the turn events have taken, shows outwardly no faintest trace of surprise, or anger, or any lesser emotion. That Staines should have kept her glove is a revelation to her, and causes her some astonishment, as she was honestly ignorant of the fact that he *had* kept it. But that he should have stolen it only to let it be returned to her in this careless public way surprises her still more. If all this is true he had acted absurdly in the first instance, and reprehensibly in the last. That he should by any means have let it slip into the possession of a woman against whom he had so lately warned her seems strange, and a swift fancy that it is all a mere fabrication of Madame's brain rises within her. The strongest feeling she knows at the moment is a sense of indignant anger against the smiling, handsome creature before her, who with a laugh upon her lips is striving to make havoc of her life. After all, Staines might have innocently brought home the glove and then flung it on some table or ottoman that it might be seen and claimed by its rightful owner; it would have been a wiser thing to give it to herself in person, but still this *might* have been; and this designing woman, seeing in part and guessing in part, had made up this plausible story out of it all for her discomfiture and her husband's delectation. A bitter laugh rises in her throat. Well! let them concoct as many stories

as they please. The fact that her glove was found in any man's possession will not take her into a divorce court, or set her husband free.

'You have given yourself an infinity of unnecessary trouble, I am afraid,' she says, fixing her eyes meaningly upon Madame. 'There is nothing even to be gained by it, as,' pointing to the glove, 'I have lost its fellow, and shouldn't have cared therefore if Captain Staines had kept it for ever.'

'Its fellow? Perhaps Captain Staines has that too,' cries Madame, with a soft, amused laugh. 'One must confess that he is persistent. Ah, the deceitful one, to pretend he had only *this* little glove as treasure trove!'

Branksmere, with a sudden ejaculation, comes up to his wife.

'*Has* he the other?' he asks, in a low but terrible voice. The veins on his forehead are standing out in thick cords.

Lady Branksmere laughs insolently.

'Madame von Thirsk is an excellent detective. Ask her,' she says, lifting her brows and letting her lips fall into a disdainful curve.

'Answer me,' fiercely.

'I shall give an answer to no man who addresses me in that tone. Do not mistake me, my lord. I am not your slave.'

'You lied to me before,' says Branksmere. 'Perhaps it is as well you do not answer, lest you lie to me again.'

Muriel turns livid. She leans back heavily against the table and glares at him.

'Coward!' she pants between her clenched teeth.

Branksmere, turning abruptly, leaves the room. All that has passed between him and Muriel has been uttered in tones so low that anyone desirous of not hearing might easily pretend ignorance of having overheard a word. Madame now, with a softly spoken good-night, moves towards the lower door, as Branksmere disappears through the upper, but Muriel stops her.

'Stay,' she said in a clear, authoritative voice, 'I want a word with you.'

CHAPTER XXII.

There was a laughing Devil in her sneer.

'A HUNDRED if you will, dear Lady Branksmere,' murmurs the Hungarian suavely. She turns, and coming back to the centre of the room, drops gracefully into a chair. It is a chair that places a table between her and Muriel.

'Your motive?' demands Lady Branksmere curtly, wheeling round upon her. She is very pale, and her rather squarely-shaped mouth is hard and stern.

'Motive? I?' Thekla von Thirsk's handsome face expresses the most unmitigated astonishment. 'But how then? I do not understand.'

'Exert that marvellous brain of yours a little, and perhaps you may. What brought you here to-night, where you knew Lord Branksmere and I were alone, with that remarkable little invention of yours? Speak, and quickly, for I will know.'

'You shall certainly know anything I have to tell you,' replies Madame, with a simple dignity that seems to bring out and heighten the subdued passion of the other and drag it into an unenviable light. 'It seems to me that I must have distressed you in some way. But I know nothing. I am entirely ignorant. If you would give me an idea, a hint.'

'No. Hints where you are concerned are valueless. I have learned that,' returns Lady Branksmere, with a cold sneer. 'You will speak without help from me.'

'All this is very perplexing,' exclaims Madame, quite miserably. Then, as though some sudden light has broken in upon her, 'Ah! pardon me! forgive me!' she cries eagerly, 'if what I now imagine is wrong, but—but was there some mystery connected with that glove, and has mine been the luckless hand to betray it? Should Captain Staines then have been left in undisputed possession of it? Ah, how unhappy I am! Dear Lady Branksmere, at least do me the justice to believe that my wretched interference was unmeant. I knew not there was anything between you and——'

'How dare you talk to me like this!' cries Muriel vehemently, trembling from head to foot. 'Anything between me

and Captain Staines! What should there be? What scandal are you striving to create?’

‘It might suggest itself that it is *you* who are creating the scandal,’ returns Madame, with a curious glance at her. ‘For me, I had not dreamt of such a thing; and am only too glad (now that you have forced the suspicion upon me) to know from your own lips that no such thing exists.’

‘Glad!’ says Lady Branksmere. Her strong, slender fingers close with unpleasant force upon the book near her, move it to and fro for a moment or so, and then cast it from her as if by an uncontrollable impulse. All the time her eyes are fixed immovably upon Madame, and her breath is coming and going through her parted lips in short, impatient sighs. ‘There is only one thing sweeter than the hearing of an evil tale of one’s acquaintance,’ she goes on presently, ‘and that is the being able to bring oneself honestly to believe in it. I am afraid your joy is chequered. Do you *quite* believe?’

‘I do not follow you, you talk to me in so strange a fashion. All I can imagine is that I have hurt you in some unknown way, either through this stupid glove or Captain Staines. And as for him, why should I seek to harm him? He has ever been both kind and attentive to me. I think him altogether charming,’ lifting her eyes to gaze straight at Muriel.

‘Do you! You want perhaps to know *my* opinion,’ with a calm show of open contempt. ‘There is really no reason why you should not.’ She pauses for a moment as though considering. Madame is looking decidedly interested, and a pale smile widens Muriel’s lips. ‘I think him good-looking,’ she says at last, dropping the insipid remark slowly as if the more to enjoy the other’s disappointment.

‘Ah! Your tone makes your judgment harsh,’ says Madame, apparently unmoved, though her lids droop and her mouth tightens. It is a regret to her that she can have nothing to repeat to either side. ‘You compel me to think you see nothing in him beyond his appearance, which is undeniably good. Yes, you are severe. What has he done to you?’ Her tone—her glance—is innocence itself, yet so full of a subtle insolence.

‘Done to me!’ repeats Lady Branksmere coldly, who after all is hardly a match for her. ‘You are, it seems to me, one of those who find all the world alike, until one shows

you his uncivil side. You refuse to praise the bridge *you* cannot cross, however safe others may know it to be. Your likes and dislikes are bound up in a very personal centre. It is a doctrine, sound, if narrow. I,' with a short glance, 'am far less amiable than you.'

'Perhaps,' suggests Madame with lowered eyes, and in a slow, measured tone, 'you are even more amiable. Perhaps, indeed, you have proved yourself a little *too* amiable!'

The insult conveyed is even heightened by her methodical delivery of it, by the total absence of passion in voice and manner. Lady Branksmere turns cold; she shrinks back and then draws herself up to her full height as might an offended queen.

'You are a very daring woman!' she says, almost in a whisper. 'It may be—even a little *too* daring—for your own good! Is your position in this house so secure that you can afford to make an enemy of its mistress?'

A touch of despair that lies heavy on her heart tells her that she herself has hinted at the truth: that this woman's position in the household is unassailable.

'How am I to translate such a speech?' asks Madame, opening wide her fine eyes. 'Are you then my enemy? But why? What is it then that I have done?'

Lady Branksmere turns her head from side to side impatiently. The very directness of the appeal baffles her. How is she to make reply? How is she to explain to this woman that she is jealous of her influence over her husband? Nay, death itself would be preferable.

'Are you my enemy?' persists Madame, looking boldly at her. Something about her suggests the idea that she is thoroughly enjoying the situation.

'You have run too fast with my words,' says Muriel slowly. 'I did not so much say that as that it will be impolitic of you to make me one.'

'Ah, but it is my nature to be so open, so candid. I am ever impolitic,' cries Madame regretfully. 'What I think, that I say. It is a fault, a grievous one, but what will you? Out it all comes before I have a moment in which to reflect; just as it happened to-night—ah!' stopping herself abruptly, as though horrified. 'There I go again.'

'To-night? Go on; what about to-night? What did you say to-night that should not be said?'

'Something tells me that I shall have to get some good

doctor to cut out my tongue,' says Madame mournfully. '*It will not* be reasonable. You tell me to avoid making myself your enemy. But how then am I to do it? I know of nothing that has been said by me that should have offended you, and yet you are angry with me. Will you give me a little idea that in future may help me to steer clear of all conversational shoals and quicksands?'

All the time she is speaking there is a touch of amusement in the Hungarian's eyes that is plain to Muriel, however carefully the other tries to hide the tell-tales with her sweeping lashes. It is an expression of triumphant defiance that makes Lady Branksmere's blood grow hot within her.

'I will,' she says coldly. 'In future forget that I exist. Leave me out of your plans, your intrigues.' She comes a little nearer to her. 'I have detained you too long already, Madame. Pray do not let me keep you another moment from your room.'

She bends her head with studied politeness. Madame returns the salutation in kind, and taking up her Etruscan lamp glides from the apartment. The book, however, she had been so anxious to obtain is left behind her, forgotten!

Lady Branksmere as she sees it smiles softly to herself. To her this want of memory tells its own tale, and again her pulses throb with angry contempt. For hours she paces up and down the deserted library, unconscious of the ever growing fatigue, the increasing strain that is weakening both her soul and body. Taking herself to task for *this* thing, and encouraging bitter resentment in her heart for *that*, piecing together all the trivial events of the day and night, and working them into one inharmonious whole.

Doors throughout the house are opened and shut during her vigil—that of the smoking-room has been given its last slam. Voices have sounded through the hall as the men passed through on their way to different apartments, and one or two careless laughs have penetrated to where she is walking up and down, friendless, alone, eating her heart away.

And now at last the house has sunk into a calm; a quiet, a deadly silence, that momentarily seems to grow more intense, and winds up her already shattered nerves to almost fever pitch. The fire has gone out for the second time, and the cold, clear light of the still May morn is stealing through the closed curtains, putting to shame the lamps within, that indeed are now beginning to burn low.

Muriel, flinging wide the window, gazes out upon the widening landscape. Sadly, reluctantly, comes up the holy dawn. The moon is still alight in the heavens, and a strange sweeping wind is rushing down from the hill-tops, with an angry sighing. But still the darkness is conquered, 'Day's foot is set upon the neck of light,' and over all the sky is creeping a shadowy grey.

The unquiet soul within, gazing out on all this tremulous beauty, grows sad with vainest longing. To her the calm, sweet break of day brings only grievous regret—the contrast between it and the sullen storm that still rages in her breast—the inward crying for the return of that old past life, which she by her own act destroyed and bereft of vaguest flavour—is almost too painful to be borne. She closes the window with a little shudder, and moves with languid steps towards the door.

She gains the hall, and traverses like one in a dream the wide marble staircase, that now looks grim and ghastly in the stern light of the coming dawn. The statues in the niches as she goes along peer out at her, looming dark and forbidding, showing just enough of themselves to assure the trembling passer-by that they bear human shape, and may be, therefore, dreaded as possible enemies lurking in hidden corners to seize and devour the unwary.

Muriel shivers nervously, and a little thrill of positive fear runs through her. She hastens her footsteps, and as she comes to the last marble figure, an Ajax, breaks into a veritable run, that carries her past it and well into the middle of the long gallery before she pauses to recover breath.

All here is cold, and still, and dreary. The moonlight is still struggling in mortal combat with the day, and through the many windows is casting a last flood of glory over everything. Sometimes a passing cloud dims its dying radiance, and now, as Muriel finds herself opposite the tapestry curtain that conceals the door leading to the apartments of the Dowager, and those forbidden ones beyond in the haunted wing, there comes to her a sound through the ghostly silence of the night that turns the blood to water in her veins!

'Great Heaven! What is it?' Lady Branksmere, huddling close against the wall nearest to her, listens with bated breath and frozen lips for the repetition of it.

CHAPTER XXIII.

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs.

Thou troublest me ; I am not in the vein.

SLOWLY it comes ! now rising, now falling, now uplifting itself into a sharp scream ! It rings through the grey dawn ; a low wailing at the first, and then an unearthly sobbing as of a spirit bound ; and always a cry that clings and pierces to one's very soul. Again and again it sounds with muffled force upon the ear. Muriel, shocked, terrified, quite benumbed with the horror of a first superstition, can scarcely breathe. The housekeeper's tale of that dead and gone Lady Branksmere—who had flung herself from the turret window in the mysterious rooms beyond, and whose spirit it was believed came again on windy, moonlight nights, to cry aloud for vengeance on her oppressors—recurs to her with appalling clearness, and strikes her cold with fear.

Her breath comes to her in long, low gasps, and her hands, cold and leaden, hang helplessly by her sides. The moments pass, and now the horrible sounds are stilled, and a silence even more terrible takes possession of the startled night. Unable to bear it, Muriel rouses herself, and, pale and haggard with heartfelt dismay, makes a rush for her own room. Before she can reach it the weird, half-stifled sound breaks forth again, and almost at the same instant Branksmere, only partly dressed and looking white and worried, steps from his dressing-room into the corridor.

Muriel runs to him ! For the first time in all their knowledge of each other she is unfeignedly glad to see him. She lays her hand upon his arm, and seems absolutely to cling to him in the agony of her nervous terror. She has apparently forgotten all save that.

'What is it ?' she gasps. 'What has happened ? Speak, Branksmere, *speak*.' Will she ever hear the human voice again ?

'It is a fresh attack,' replies he hastily. 'She—the—the Dowager, is growing worse, I fear. The fits are severer, more frequent.' His agitation seems extreme. 'Do not delay me.'

He lifts her hand from his arm, and would have hurried past her but for the glimpse he gets of her face. He pauses, and gazes at her keenly in the uncertain light.

'Where have you been all this time?' he asks. 'Why, you are still dressed! Down in that cold room?'

'Yes—yes. But never mind that. What is the matter with her? What an awful cry. Is she in pain—in grief? Yet it did not sound like pain—like—like *madness* rather!'

She stands before him, trembling and shivering.

'A fit!' replies he shortly. 'Forget it as soon as you can; it need not concern you. Go to bed at once; this is no hour for you to be up. I believed you asleep long ago.'

His manner though scarcely unkind is still authoritative, but Muriel, spent as she is in mind and body, fails to notice it.

'You are *sure* it is the Dowager?' she asks faintly, her thoughts still running on that bloody tale of woe related to her by Mrs. Stout; her mind's eye fixed with an obstinate pertinacity upon the mangled remains of that unfortunate Lady of Branksmere, as they must have been when found next morning lying cold and broken on the courtyard, paved with its cruel stones.

Had she been thinking less of this direful story and more of Branksmere, she might have noticed the change that had passed over his countenance as her question fell from her lips. He starts violently:

'Who else should it be?' he demands, with a vehemence disproportionate to the mildness of her query. 'What absurd ideas are you getting into your head now? Get some sleep, I tell you; the day is dawning.' He goes away from her a step or two, and then comes back again. 'You are shivering,' he says half-angrily, touching her hand. 'That absurd practice of yours of sending your maid to bed at twelve, whether you are present or absent, leaves you without a fire.'

He moves into a clearer bit of light and consults his watch.

'It is now three. I don't suppose there is a spark left,' he growls impatiently. 'No matter how unhappy one may be, it is a *bêtise* to kill oneself. Go into my room for awhile, there is a good fire there, and warm yourself for a moment or two.'

'I am not so cold as you think. I shall,' with a little scornful glance, 'probably live through the night. I am tired only; worn out. I want to go to bed.' The dark circles beneath her heavy eyes bear witness to that.

'I would advise you to look at my fire for a bit, nevertheless.'

'No, thank you.'

'What an obstinate woman you are,' cries he suddenly. 'You would, I believe, rather freeze to death than accept a comfort at my hands. Be reasonable—go to my room. I swear to you,' bitterly, 'I shall not intrude upon you there. I shall probably not see it again for hours.'

Following upon his words comes again that awful cry that strikes them both dumb. It trembles, rushes through the gallery with a faint horrible clearness, and then dies away.

'Go, go,' cries Muriel, in a choked tone. 'Why do you delay? No. I will not go to your room. Let this decision of mine end the discussion.'

'As you will,' returns he, shrugging his shoulders, and striding away from her into the darkness beyond. Muriel, tired and saddened, goes to her own room, but has scarcely locked the door when a knock sounds upon one of the panels.

'Open!' says her husband's voice irritably.

'What is it you want?' asks she wondering. Her hesitation evidently creates in him a deeper sense of anger.

'Not to come in, certainly,' he rejoins, in a tone that conveys a frown to the listener. 'Here, open quickly, I tell you, and take this from me. It is burning my fingers.'

Muriel flings wide the door to find him standing on the threshold with a huge burning log in one hand and a coalbox full of red-hot cinders in the other.

'What a thing for you to do!' cries Muriel shocked. 'I wish——'

'Let me get rid of it,' interrupts he ungraciously. He rushes past her, and deposits his cargo in the grate—first the burning log, then the hot coals on the top of it. They amalgamate instantly, and burst into a glorious flame. 'There. Perhaps that will keep you from the consequences of your folly,' he says brusquely. 'Your staying in a fireless room till morning has grown almost into day.'

All at once his face changes, and a crimson flush dyes it. The calm light dies from his eyes, and a hot suspicion takes its place.

'Were you *alone*?' he asks suddenly.

She has sunk into a chair, and is sitting with her hands folded listlessly upon her knees. All the spirit seems gone but of her.

'Quite alone,' she answers, very gently. Then she looks up at him. 'Spare me any more insults for this one night at least,' she entreats feebly. 'I am so tired.'

He turns aside from her abruptly, and, leaving the room, continues his way to the Dowager's apartments.

The sun is well abroad before Muriel wakes. All the birds of the air are singing, and nature, fresh and sweet, is crying aloud to the lazy ones of earth to come out and rejoice with it—a cry she disregards. It is indeed close on noon when she descends to the morning-room, only to find it deserted by all but Lady Anne Branksmere, who is idling over a set of charming etchings.

'Is your headache any better?' asks she, rising to greet her, with genuine kindness in her tone. She presses a gentle kiss upon Muriel's white cheek. 'Ah, you do look ill! How foolish to struggle downstairs so early with this momentous ball before you this evening, at which everyone is bound to look her best lest the county swear. Come, let me establish you upon this lounge near the window; turn your eyes from the light so, and lie still, while I finish this etching.'

Muriel, to whom Lady Anne is the most grateful creature in the world, after Margery, accedes to her request, and though refusing the lounge sinks back thankfully in a delicious old arm-chair that could easily contain two of her, and closes her eyes against the light.

But her thoughts forbid rest.

'Anne,' she says presently, leaning forward, 'what of this woman, this Madame von Thirsk?'

'Well, what?' asks Lady Anne mildly, though in truth she is a little startled.

'You should know a good deal of her. Tell me what you know.'

Anne Branksmere, casting a shrewd glance at her, draws her own wise conclusions.

'There is so little to tell,' she says, when with a steady hand she has put in a touch or two in her etching. 'She is, to begin with, a Hungarian of good birth, with a considerable fortune. Some time ago she became acquainted with the Dowager. How, I hardly know, but she seems to have struck up a lasting friendship with her; became enamoured of her charms, no doubt,' with an amused shrug, 'and has been devoted to her ever since. *Vla tout.*'

'With just the rest left out,' returns Muriel deliberately. 'You will not speak, then? You like this woman?'

'Do not mistake me. I would speak, believe me, were

there anything to say, because I happen to like you better,' says Lady Anne, with quiet meaning. 'But I assure you there is nothing, or, if there is, I am ignorant of it. *Like her?* Well, I hardly know—— And you?'

'I detest her,' coldly.

'Now that I think her over that scarcely surprises me. I have grown so used to her myself in all these years, you see, that I have forgotten to analyse my feelings with regard to her. Yet it seems natural enough to me that one, a stranger to her, might fail to see her in a rosy light. She has her virtues, nevertheless. She is a very angel to that hapless old skeleton upstairs, who, you must acknowledge, is not exactly attractive either in appearance or manners.'

'That makes her devotion all the more remarkable.'

'As I think I told you before, the intimacy between them began almost immediately after poor Arthur's tragic death. About that time, too, the old lady became a victim to certain nervous attacks, brought on, they said, by the shock she sustained on hearing of her grandson's death. To me,' says Lady Anne thoughtfully, 'it is always a matter of wonder how she manages to still hold her worn-out thread of life free of breakage, considering what an additional pressure these attacks must make upon it. It is seven years since poor Arthur died—therefore for seven years she has suffered from them. I never saw her in one, but I have been given to understand that they are very distressing to witness. Yet Madame has been faithful to that trial of friendship; she has carefully attended her all these years.'

'Seven years! A long time,' says Muriel absently. 'You have been a widow all that time?' looking up at Lady Anne suddenly, with a surprised gravity. 'I wonder you have never married.'

'So do I,' returns Lady Anne frankly, with a slight laugh. 'But don't despair about me yet. I dare say I shall marry Primrose before I die. I am very fond of that little man, and if the fact that he asks me regularly once a month to share his life means anything, I should say he is fond of me too. Yes, I really believe he loves me, and for myself alone you will be pleased to understand; I have really no money worth speaking about, and he has considerably more than is good for him, or that he quite knows what to do with.'

It is rather amusing to see how the tall, handsome, Juno-

like woman revels in this thought and makes a point of it. She draws up her *posée* figure to its greatest height, and smiles pleasantly. She is evidently charmed with her conquest of the little man, who would almost have fitted into her pocket. 'And yet I don't know,' she goes on, with a quick sigh. 'When I remember the past, and how good poor Arthur always was to me, I feel as if I should never marry again.'

'Poor Primrose—it is sad that a shadow should be the means of depriving him of his desire,' says Muriel slowly. 'If, in time, you do bring yourself to accept him, I shall regard him as one of the few fortunate ones of the earth.'

'I drop you a curtsy,' returns Lady Anne. 'But to return to our subject. I don't want you to encourage any erroneous views about Madame. She is of inestimable value to that old woman above, and her place would be difficult to fill. Think what responsibility she lifts from your shoulders. I hear those attacks of the Dowager's are growing in strength daily. You could scarcely leave the miserable old creature entirely to the care of servants, and Madame is such an excellent go-between. If I were you I think I should look upon her in the light of a special Providence.'

'What of her husband? She *had* one?' asks Lady Branksmere—taking no notice of Anne's last remark.

'Beyond any dispute. He was a respectable old—Russian, I think it was—with nothing to be said for or against him. An amiable nonentity. He lived; he died! That is all. There was nothing in between.'

'He really did die?'

'Oh, dear, yes; and rather early in the proceedings, I believe. She is a *bona-fide* widow, there can be no doubt of that.' Then very gently: 'If you want to get her out of the house, Muriel, why not speak to Branksmere about it? I should think the Dowager's discomfort and objections might be squared.'

Muriel is silent. Would it indeed be possible to do this thing? She would have liked to discuss the matter, but how explain to Lady Anne her doubts of Branksmere's willingness to help her. The 'speaking' to him might not perhaps enable her to compass her desire after all. She sighs impatiently.

'And yet I would have you consider before taking so important a step,' continues Lady Anne, not noticing particularly her somewhat awkward hesitation. 'Madame you

Thirsk is not an ordinary woman. She, and she alone, I am told, can manage the Dowager when those direful attacks have seized hold of her. A new face at such times infuriates the poor old woman, and in fact no one except Madame and Branksmere himself dare approach her when she is suffering from one. I would have you think what a world of trouble you are accumulating for yourself if you decide on discarding Thekla. She is, beyond everything, a woman of character.'

'I can quite believe that.' (Bad character, she tells herself, with a sense of undying enmity towards the woman in question.)

'She has proved it. For seven long years she has been true to her trust.'

'Do you honestly think,' asks Muriel suddenly, 'that she has wasted all those years through love of Lady Branksmere?'

Anne Branksmere lays down her pencil. 'As far and as honestly as I can judge, Yes; and, at all events, of this one thing be sure: if she at any time entertained a *tendresse* for Branksmere, he never entertained one for her!' Once again she takes up her pencil. 'Think of to-night! Think of to-night!' she cries gaily, with a sudden sparkling change of tone that kills any solemnity that may have been in her manner before. 'And dismiss from you all distasteful fancies; they are fatal to one's digestion and ruinous to one's complexion.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

What! wouldst thou have a serpent sting thee twice?

ALTHOUGH Muriel will not permit herself to receive as gospel all Lady Anne has said, still her last words assuredly carry with them the germs of comfort. In spite of herself she is solaced by them. A *longing* to believe in them helps her to a belief, as well as a desire, to be at peace with her self-love, which is strong within her. A woman may not care for her husband—such sad things sometimes are—but still, to be slighted by him and placed second to another will always be very bitter to her.

Now Muriel feels softened, saddened. The wild thoughts of last night sink into insignificance. Perhaps after all she had too hastily judged Madame—had been unreasonably cruel

in her manner towards her. Anne has dwelt upon her good points, has shown them out, and assured her of them. Anne! whose judgment is always calm and strong and sure. Has she, Muriel, been blinded, led astray by a mere fancy, and dulled by a prejudice that has no foundation save in her own diseased and burdened brain?

Through the house there is running the news of the Dowager's last seizure, and of how Madame sat up with her all the night, careless of fatigue. The old woman's bodily foe had been, it is whispered, stronger than usual, and those who watched with her had fought hard for victory. The truth of this struggle is manifested in Madame's face, as Muriel sees it presently. Passing through the hall with a slow and wearied step she chances to enter the library, where Muriel, too, has wandered, and not seeing Lady Branksmere, sinks into an arm-chair and gazes absently at the fire. Her face is white, her eyes heavy, her whole air stricken with a grief she seems so anxious to conceal, that Muriel, who has issued impulsively from her unmeant hiding-place in the window, feels she dares not allude to it.

A desire to forget her own unestablished wrongs, to let the uncertain doubt of the past weeks die, is great within her as she moves towards the arm-chair, where the woman she has been regarding as an enemy lies crushed and sorrow-stricken. Before she can reach her, however, or make her presence known, Branksmere enters the room.

Madame raises her head, and for the first time seeing Muriel, starts a little. Instantly she flings from her the air of dejection that had been hanging round her, and taking up a box of bonbons lying on the table at her elbow, seems to lose herself in a pleasant appreciation of them. All suspicion of care quits her face. The mouth that a moment since dropped sadly now grows full and red; her eyes gleam. She leans back in her chair with a comfortable gesture, and assumes an expression that speaks well for her *bien être*. Branksmere makes his wife a cold salutation.

'You are in less pain, I hope?' he asks politely. 'They told me your head was very bad.'

'It was. It is now, however, free of the throbbing.'

He bows again as though courteously pleased to hear it, and walks past her down the room to the bookcase at the lower end. Muriel going up to Madame holds out her hand.

'You, too, had a bad night, I fear?' she says with a faint

smile, and in a tone that struggles to be gracious. 'I hope you have in part recovered from your fatigue; that you are feeling better?'

'I am feeling *well*, thank you,' with slow and marked astonishment in voice and manner. She looks at Lady Branksmere with a curious smile, whilst altogether refusing to see or accept the proffered hand.

'Will you not take my hand?' asks Lady Branksmere haughtily.

'Do you, then, wish me to accept it?'

'Naturally,' turning very pale, 'or I should not be standing as I now am.' She is looking down upon Madame in a stern, rigid attitude, with her hand still outstretched. Madame laughs.

'Ah! that is supremely good of you—very sweet!' she murmurs, with a slight increase of the curious smile and a little shrug of her handsome shoulders. She turns back deliberately to her bonbons, as though the dainty snow-white hand of her hostess gleaming with its jewels is unseen by her.

'It is war, then, between us?' asks Muriel, in a low, concentrated tone. 'It is well! Peace would have been impossible. I thank you for the chance you have afforded me of learning our true positions with regard to each other.'

'You must acknowledge then that I am at least good-natured,' says Madame, unmoved and always with the eternal smile. 'I have saved you a scene. Now—without any trouble—you *know*! Try some of these sweetmeats, they are altogether desirable!'

'So good; so sweet! Quite like me!' replies Lady Branksmere contemptuously.

'Ah? Yes?' questions Madame reflectively. 'Well—perhaps so. Now and then one *does* find them—hollow!'

'What! the sweetmeats?' asks Branksmere, who has ransacked the bookcase successfully, and has now come up to them again in the delusive belief that they are chattering to each other on friendly terms. 'They are empty at times, eh? Nothing in them!'

Madame, breaking into a low laugh of utter enjoyment, rises to her feet and sweeps past him and out of the room. Muriel, too, has sprung from her chair, but he is hardly prepared for the hurricane her face portrays.

With parted lips and flashing eyes she turns to her husband.

'You meant that!' she says, her bosom panting. 'You assist that woman in her insolence!'

'Insolence! In Madame! I do not understand.'

'You are innocence itself!' Her voice has sunk almost to a breath. She advances a step or two nearer to him, and now twines her hands behind her, so that she can, unseen, grasp the back of the chair nearest her. This gives her a help; a sense of support; and so standing her beautiful figure looks positively superb. She is dressed in a satin gown of striped amber and black that adds to her height, and throws out the delicate pallor of her skin.

'Send that woman away,' she says imperiously. 'This Madame von Thirsk!—I demand this thing as my *right*—as your wife!'

'Why should you demand it?' coldly. 'Our family has been under heavy obligations to her for years.'

'Are *you* under heavy obligations?'

'It is at least impossible I should treat her as you desire.'

'You *refuse*, then? You, in effect, protect her against *me*. What is this woman to you?'

'To me individually, nothing!'

'Yet for her sake you insult your wife!'

'My good child,' says Branksmere, in a rather bored tone, 'you overdo the thing, rather. Believe me I would willingly insult no one—you least of all!'

'Words! words!' cries she passionately. 'You *dare* not send her away even if you would. That is the unvarnished truth! I am not mad or blind, Branksmere. If you refuse to take a step in this matter I shall understand that you rank your—*mistress* higher than your wife.'

Branksmere starts as though he had been shot. The veins swell upon his forehead. He looks at the beautiful, angry creature before him as though he could kill her. He takes a step forward.

'How dare you so speak to me!' he says in such a terrible voice that Muriel secretly quails beneath it. She throws up her head, however, with a dark frown, and walks towards the door with a slow, disdainful step. On the threshold she pauses to glance back at him.

'As *you* decline to act, I shall speak to Madame myself,' she says with cold distinctness, closing the door behind her.

She crosses the hall and enters the blue ante-room that experience has taught her Madame, as a rule, frequents. It

is a quiet little room that leads nowhere, and is of small account in the household.

'I must speak to you,' she says, going straight up to the Hungarian, and addressing her without further preamble. 'After all that has passed between us of late, some arrangement is necessary. When do you leave?'

'Ask Branksmere!' replies Madame, looking her fair in the eyes.

'Lord Branksmere! What has he got to do with your going or staying?'

'Ask him that, too.'

For a moment Muriel looks so ghastly that one might believe her on the verge of fainting.

'This is terrible!' she says in a tremulous way. Am I to understand that you *will* not leave my house? What bond is there between you and Branksmere that should kill within you all sense of decency and womanhood?'

'Alas! that I cannot answer you,' says Madame, spreading wide her hands; 'that I must *again* say to you—ask Branksmere!' She looks up at Muriel with a half amused air, and with a little mischievous smile that lurks like a devil at the corners of her lips.

CHAPTER XXV.

'Tis more easy to tie knots than to unloose them.

'THE question is, what it was you *did* say to her,' exclaims Branksmere, with suppressed violence. He is looking white and perturbed, and there is a rather set expression about his lower jaw. He has arranged his shoulders in a forcible fashion against the marble chimney-piece, and is gazing darkly at Madame von Thirsk, as though demanding from her an explanation.

'Say to her? Why, absolutely nothing! Of what are you accusing me, Branksmere? Do you not know me yet? I was silent, ominously so, perhaps; but I confess I was a little taken aback. Ask her—Lady Branksmere—to repeat to you a single remark I made voluntarily.' Madame lets her fine eyes rest on him a little plaintively. 'It is unlike you to misjudge me, my friend; but the truth asserts itself ever. I

tell you I was most scrupulously careful to breathe of nothing that might betray you. I said always when she questioned me, "Ask Branksmere!" No more, no less! From first to last during the distressing interview—and I confess, with a careful sigh, 'it has disheartened me—I said nothing else.'

'But——'

'You will not believe me, then? Ask her, I desire you.'

'It is not that. I do believe you, but such a little thing as that to—to——'

'Make her lose her temper? Ah! you forget that a sore heart makes one petulant.'

'Why should her heart be sad above its fellows?' asks he, a sullen cloud making his face angry.

'There are reasons, *très cher*. I am your friend always, as I say, and I must speak. I ask you frankly, Branksmere, were you her heart's first choice? Ah, there! not another word then. Many a woman loves well for the second time, and you may yet be blessed; but *à présent*——! To return to our subject. I tell you I have been faithful to you all through, and I said to her "Ask Branksmere!" only because I thought it was the best thing to say under the circumstances.'

'It is difficult to know what is the best thing,' returns he gloomily.

'There I agree with you, but at the moment be sure I was wise. I am at times, as you have reason to know,' with a quick, flashing smile, 'rather too impulsive, and if I had attempted an explanation, dire might have been the results. I should probably have said just the little word too much, and our secret would have been imperilled.'

'Our secret, as you call it, is carrying me rather too far,' says Branksmere. 'Something must be done to lessen the pressure; some explanation offered.'

'I am almost sure I do not grasp your meaning. It is *impossible*,' exclaims Madame, growing deadly pale. 'You will not tell me that after all these years you are about to enlighten another—a stranger?'

'Partially. Yes.'

'Pah! There is no such thing as a partial explanation in such a case. Branksmere, pause! Consider what it is you contemplate. Have you forgotten how many your revelation will dishonour? There is Lady Anne.'

'Poor Anne!' replies he sadly. 'After all,' lifting his head, 'perhaps publicity is the one thing that should serve her.'

'Ah! You are like all other men. You think what you want to think.'

'I think only now that something is due to Lady Branksmere.'

'And is nothing due to *me*, after all these long years? Do you, perhaps, imagine that I am happy, that I do not suffer? That the insults your wife delights in heaping upon me are unfelt by me? That I——'

'Let me speak for a moment.'

'Am I a cypher?' continues she passionately, disdaining to listen. 'Is all feeling, think you, dead within me? I have borne much for you, Branksmere, but even patience has its limit.'

'If you won't hear me——' shrugging his shoulders.

'You imagine, it may be, that I stay on here from choice,' cries she, springing to her feet and confronting him with her dark eyes all aglow. 'A sorry choice! It is only true that I stay on here braving all things for *your* sake, to save your honour—the honour of your house!'

She drops back into her chair again, and clasps her hands tightly together.

'There are other reasons, Thekla,' says Lord Branksmere slowly, his eyes on hers. 'Do you dare to deny to me that it is *love* that chains your feet and keeps you here?'

He smiles, and leaning over her lays a gentle hand upon her arm. For a full minute she gazes at him as though she would read his very soul. Her colour dies from her. Does he mean——? If he *should*. She brings her teeth down sharply on her under lip with such force that the crimson blood rushing to it dyes it vividly, making it gleam like a red shadow against the intense pallor of her face. Has he forgotten all, or is it just now strongly with him? Then the quick consciousness fades. Cruel memory, strange hope—all disappear! Her lids droop over her burning eyes. It is with difficulty she restrains her fingers from rising to cover them.

'You are right,' she answers, in a stifled tone. 'Love alone chains me to this spot.'

'I know it,' returns Branksmere, with a peculiar smile. There is silence between them for a little while, and then—

'It is unfortunate that her suspicions should have been aroused,' he goes on slowly. 'It never occurred to me that it might be so, but you, as a woman, should have known.'

'What are her suspicions?' coldly.

She regards him keenly as he makes a pretence of poking the fire, and notes the dull red of shamed confusion that flames into his cheeks.

'Paltry ones, I confess—but can you blame her that she encourages them? What must she think? What translation of the difficulty presents itself to her?'

'There is your grandmother, the Dowager Lady Branksmere—she should account for everything.'

'For the whole air of mystery that surrounds us? Would it account to you?'

'If I loved you. Yes.'

The insinuation is obvious. Madame is glad within her as she notes the sudden change that darkens his face. Why should this truth not be held up for ever before his eyes? Staines' words recur to her at this instant, standing out before her in letters, as it were, of blood.

"It seems to me that Branksmere might then readily sue for and obtain a divorce, that would leave him free to wed another woman in every way more suited to him."

'Love has nothing to do with this,' says Branksmere, breaking in upon her reverie. 'It is a point where duty touches one more than anything else.' He is looking haggard and miserable, but her heart remains unmoved.

'You will tell her, then?' she says. 'You have finally made up your mind to break the most sacred oath a man ever swore?'

'I shall not explain everything,' interrupts he impatiently. 'You shall be kept out of it; and there are other things.—I only wish to give her what satisfaction I honourably can. I feel that when one marries a woman one owes her fealty, loyalty, all! and that I unhappily must refuse her the entire confidence that belongs to her of right.'

'And she? What does she owe you? The same? Fealty? Loyalty? An entire confidence? It is a very charming conception, but—— Well, I hope you are satisfied, Branksmere.'

'Why do you seek to torture me like this?' cries he, turning suddenly upon her with flashing eyes. 'You are an old—*friend*; but even such a one may go too far. Say I once loved her; say my love is dead. Still, shall I not writhe when her—my—honour is attacked? And who shall say I have not been to blame with regard to her? She has had much cause for discontent. I will remove it in so far as I am able.'

'You can make all things clear to her if you will,' says Madame, rising and leaning her hands heavily on the table before her. 'Do. You have my full permission, at least. What is the old bond that unites us in comparison with your—wife's happiness?'

'No. I shall leave you out of it. My honour is given to you as well as to her. I do not forget!' returns he slowly. Turning away from her he sinks into a chair by a davenport and mechanically takes a pen in hand.

'When will you seek to allay the fears of Lady Branksmere?' asks Madame, in a voice that seeks in vain to control its contempt and its disappointment.

'To-night—no,' glancing at his watch. 'It is already too late. This ball will engage her attention, and just now her guests require her. I shall wait. To-morrow.' He pauses, pen in hand, as though musing, forgetful of her presence, 'To-morrow——'

He dips his pen into the ink, and drawing a sheet of paper towards him begins to write rapidly. Madame, seeing herself so innocently ignored, steps on to the balcony.

'Adieu, Branksmere,' she says courteously, glancing backwards.

'Adieu,' replies he, in a muffled tone that convinces her he has for the time being forgotten her existence.

With a little frown she moves away out of sight of the window, but a last thought recurring to her, she retraces her steps, and once more enters the library. Branksmere is still writing. As she stands, the heavy old gold curtains fall round and hide her, and possessed by the clever patience that usually characterises her she remains quite still, leaning against the shutter, waiting until he shall throw his pen aside. As she so stands she is quite concealed from view.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The passions, like heavy bodies down steep hills, once in motion, move themselves, and know no ground but the bottom.

A FOOTMAN entering lays an exquisite white bouquet upon the table in the centre of the room.

'Macpherson sent these in, my lord,' he says in a subdued voice, seeing his master occupied.

‘Hah! very good. But wait—wait,’ mumbles Branksmere, who is still scribbling rapidly. The footman stands immovable. Presently Branksmere comes to a dead stop, and flings down his pen. He looks up at the ceiling as if for inspiration, and finally seizing the pen again, he signs his name at the end of the paper. He had meant to write the formal ‘Branksmere,’ but some hidden force had compelled him to inscribe the more familiar—the less formal—‘George.’ He dashes it off in a tremendous hurry, as though scarcely sure of himself and as though a little ashamed, and, having twisted his note into shape, seals it and thrusts it hurriedly into the white bouquet lying on the table behind him. He has done it all carelessly and openly, as one disdaining any pretence at secrecy. It is but a manner of sending the note to its appointed place. The footman, however, staring stolidly through the lower window sees nothing of the transaction, and is even blind to the presence of the curtain-hidden Madame, who, however, as if to make up for his stupidity, has seen a good deal and understood the rest.

‘Tell Bridgman to place that in her ladyship’s room with my compliments,’ says Branksmere, rousing the ruminating footman to a sense of his presence. He points to the white bouquet as he speaks, and then hastens from the library, suddenly remindful of some small duty that should have been performed an hour ago.

Madame, coming softly from behind the curtains as though she had just entered the room from the gardens beyond, rather startles the footman, as, with the lazy elegance that distinguishes him, he is taking up the flowers from the table.

‘Ah! Jenkins, I was just going to ring for you,’ she says pleasantly. ‘Can you tell me where his lordship is?’

‘He was ’ere this very moment, m’m; you’ve missed him by a chance,’ replies Jenkins graciously, who is a very affable young man. Madame, as a rule, stands well with all the servants, being smoothly spoken and liberal. ‘’E just went out as you come in.’

‘Ah! unfortunate. Have you any idea where he has gone?’

‘No, m’m. Seemed in a ’urry, I thought. ‘’E give me these flowers to give Mrs. Bridgman.’

‘For Mrs. Bridgman?’

‘Yes, m’m, to place in my lady’s room, and then went out hisself, quite sudden like. Want him, m’m—shall I see where ’e is?’

‘Yes. Though’—musingly—‘it is of little importance. Still—— Leave the flowers there, Jenkins, until you return, and bring me word if his lordship is disengaged. But do not disturb him if he is busy. Simply bring me word where he now is.’

‘Yes, m’m.’ Laying the flowers once again upon the table, Jenkins bows himself from the room and starts on his quest.

Madame, taking up the bouquet, deliberately draws from it the hidden note, and with unhesitating fingers breaks open the seal. It is a short note, and not very carefully worded, yet its contents both anger and perplex her.

‘I shall have to run up to town first thing in the morning, but hope to return by the three o’clock train. May I hope you will grant me an interview? There are a few things I would say and explain to you.—Yours,

‘GEORGE.’

This ‘George’ that had so exercised his mind causes a throb of anger in the breast of Madame. So! He has made an appointment for the morrow. An appointment that means disclosure, confidence—and to her, Madame, ruin! So long as the secret is hers and his alone she holds the cards, and can defy even his wife, but that once disclosed, her reign will be surely over. The coward! The miscreant! That no love is lost between him and his cold, irresponsible wife is believed by Madame, and yet for the sake of a quiet life he would betray all! Peace is his cry, but it will be hardly ‘Peace with honour!’ She clenches her teeth passionately, and pushes the note far from her across the ebony table. How to prevent this interview! How to shut his mouth! Her very *soul* seems set upon the accomplishment of this!

To burn the letter, to fling it into those tempting, greedy flames over there is a simple thing, but there is danger in it. Nay, there must be—there *shall* be—a less clumsy method of gaining her ends. Mechanically she folds the note again, and lighting a taper, seals it with the Branksmere crest lying on the table before her; she even slips it amongst the flowers again, but after a moment’s reflection removes it from thence and places it in her pocket. Yet she is no nearer a solution of her difficulty than she was before. How dull her brain is to-day! Impatiently she pushes back the dark clustering hair from her brow. She is so lost in thought that presently when

Captain Staines lays his hand upon her arm she starts violently and turns pale.

‘Dreaming?’ questions he lightly. ‘Of the donor of those flowers, no doubt.’

‘You are right,’ with a curious smile, ‘though the donation is not to me.’

‘No? For whom, then?’ His brow has grown suddenly black.

‘For Lady Branksmere, from her husband!’ For the first time she notices that he, too, is carrying a very exquisite bouquet of white heath. As she sees this she breaks into a low, ironical laugh.

‘She is favoured,’ she says, in a bitter tone.

‘He is coming out in a new light. To pose as the attentive husband is quite a departure for him,’ says Staines, with a wicked sneer. ‘What a farce it all is! Yet she will wear his flowers in preference to mine to-night.’

‘I hardly see how she dare do otherwise—if—— She lets a little pause drift into her speech, being apparently occupied in blowing away a tiny dust speck from her sleeve—‘If you permit it. It is a rather early stage in the proceedings for her to openly defy her husband and that thing so far more important—the world.’

‘Perilously early. But the question is, not whether I will permit it but how to prevent it. She will, as you say, not dare to defy her world—she will wear his flowers.’

‘Whilst longing for yours!’ She regards him keenly as she drops this sop to his pride. ‘It is true. She will do this thing if——’

‘Well?’

‘You give her the chance.’

‘Pah! Riddles are a bore. Speak plainly if you will speak,’ retorts he rudely.

‘Gently, my friend,’ says Madame, closing her eyes a little. ‘There is nothing to be gained by loud speaking save unenviable attention. What I would say to you is this. How marvellously alike, both in construction and colour, are these two charming bouquets.’

In truth they are wonderfully similar. The flowers are not the same, but all are white, and the delicate maiden-hair fern that springs up between the snowy blossoms of both renders the likeness even more remarkable.

'I see. You would have me destroy his, and send mine in his name,' says Staines slowly.

'Poof! No! We must think of something less heavy than that. It is a poor plot,' returns she, with quite a gay little laugh. 'Of what use is the advance of intellect of which we hear so much if we cannot produce a safer plan? And besides,' touching both floral offerings, 'it would be a pity, surely, to condemn either of these gracious things to an ignominious death.'

'What is your purpose, then?' demands he sulkily.

'Why, to exchange them, of course,' airily. 'Fair exchange is no robbery. It defrauds no man. And, indeed, who shall say that your flowers do not carry away the palm of beauty!' She leans towards him, and sinks her voice to a whisper. 'Send yours up to Lady Branksmere with—*her husband's compliments*, and trust me to have his delivered later on with *yours*. It sounds a pretty complexity, does it not? And it will work well, believe me.'

Staines regards her fixedly.

'You would place me a good deal in your power,' he says at last slowly.

'Your heart fails you?' with a slight shrug. 'Then do not proceed, I advise you. Give up this little affair. To know fear is to insure failure.'

'You mistake me. I do not fear you,' coldly. 'I understand myself sufficiently to know I have talent enough to swear myself out of any difficulty should the worst come. What I am now pondering is the possibility—not of my own failure, but that of your excellent plan. You think she will select the flowers she believes to be Branksmere's. But how if, after all, she should elect to wear mine? That would be one to him and check to me, even though she did not mean it.'

'She will not defy him to that extent—*yet!* I tell you my scheme will *not* fall through, and will injure her materially in his eyes—Jenkins will be back directly; the message I gave had no meaning in it. Shall I,' indicating both bouquets by a graceful wave of her hand, 'change them?'

'As an experiment it will be amusing,' returns Staines dryly. Taking up his own flowers he lays them ready for Jenkins' hand.

'Do not let him see the others. Servants, as a rule, are fatally troublesome,' says Madame, removing the delicate waxen blossoms that Branksmere had ordered with such care,

and dropping them contemptuously if lightly into a safe corner, where they lie hidden by some falling lace.

She has said nothing to him about the extracted letter. To him, as to all others save Branksmere, her secret is unknown, unguessed. But her mind is still full of subtle workings that aim at the prevention of to-morrow's interview between Branksmere and his wife.

'There is another thing,' she says softly, with careful indifference, as Staines turns as if to leave her. 'Something I learned by chance, and that has suddenly occurred to me, may be of some small use to you. Having,' with a pale smile, 'gone into partnership with you in this matter, when I see an opportunity, however weak, of helping you, I make a point of remembering it.' She pauses, still smiling, as though for some acknowledgment from him, but he betrays neither gratitude nor any other feeling.

'Go on,' he says stolidly. Plainly, he is unimpressed by her profession of solicitude for his welfare.

'Branksmere has written to his wife demanding, or rather entreating, an interview with her on the morrow.'

'For what purpose? Is it a quarrel?' asks he sharply. She has succeeded at last in thoroughly rousing him.

'Far from that. A reconciliation, rather. A meeting that threatens to be full of domestic tenderness, and will upset your arrangements cleverly. Ha! You see how he dreads your influence over her already, when he can condescend to beseech her.'

'I wish I was as sure of that as you seem to be,' returns he, with a grim smile.

'He has to go to town by the early train in the morning, and has asked her to grant him a private audience on his return.'

'When will that be?'

'Three o'clock.'

'And she—what does she say?'

'Nothing, as yet.'

'She hesitates, then?' eagerly.

'Not so much that, as—— The fact is,' says Madame, unfurling in an indolent fashion the huge black fan hanging from her waist, 'she has not yet seen that letter to which I have alluded.'

Staines regards her with an unfeigned curiosity that is yet largely mingled with admiration.

'And *you* have!' he remarks dryly. 'Keep your own counsel about that, by all means, but give me a hint or two that may still serve—*us*. You have reminded me that the victory of one means victory for both.'

'Hardly—but I am content to take my chance.'

'She knows nothing yet, then, of his desire for this interview? And he has appointed three o'clock to-morrow for it to take place? Is this how the matter stands?'

'Yes, and if by some lucky chance she should fail to keep this appointment—how would it be then?'

'You give me food for thought.'

'Digest it then. If she should fail, let me remind you that probably a reconciliation would be further off than ever.'

'Get that letter destroyed. If she knows nothing of its contents she cannot keep the appointment.'

'As I hinted to you before, my friend, you grow clumsy. Your constructions are too crude. A letter is a tangible thing; when lost—which is very seldom in these days of admirable management—one cries aloud for it. One demands restitution. For the destroyer it grows awkward. No; better the letter should be delivered just a little too late. That rests with me. With you it remains to see that she is nowhere within the castle grounds at the time named.'

'Three, did you say?'

'Have you thought it out?'

'Give me time. At present I can only assure you that whoever fails to-morrow it shall not be I.'

He lays his finger on his lip, and disappears though the window into the gardens as Jenkins' returning footsteps sound in the hall.

'My lord has gone up to one of the home farms, m'm, with Mr. Donaldson,' he informs Madame regretfully. Mr. Donaldson is the Scotch steward.

'Very well. It scarcely matters. Take these flowers up now to Lady Branksmere's maid.'

As she gives them to him she watches his face narrowly as though to detect any suspicion or surprise in it. Her espionage goes unrewarded. Mr. Jenkins' countenance continues what Nature intended it to be—a most satisfactory blank. To the dullest observer it would be plain that he has noticed no change in the bouquet, and that one bunch of white flowers is to him quite the same thing as another. He departs with a decorous languor of gait to Mrs. Bridgman,

and desires her to lay the fragrant heaths upon my lady's table with 'my lord's compliments.'

Some hours later, when Muriel is sitting in her bedroom before her glass, letting her maid put some finishing touches to a toilette of white and gold that already is perfect beyond description, a second bouquet is brought to her with Captain Staines' kind regards. A glance tells her that it, too, is white, and pure and fragrant as that unwelcome one that had met her eyes on first entering her room this evening.

'No, not there!' she cries a little sharply, as Bridgman would have placed the new gift next to Lord Branksmere's flowers upon the small buhl table near the screen, and presently, dismissing her woman, she leans back in her chair, and taking up both bouquets examines them with a strange tightening at her throat.

Branksmere's delicate offering, following as suddenly as it did upon the bitter scene that had passed between him and her, had roused within her a very storm of passionate indignation. It had come without a word, without so much as even a poor message; had been flung to her as a mere stop-gap. During that last terrible interview in which she had imperiously demanded from him an explanation of Madame's words, 'Ask Branksmere!' he had almost promised her one, and now these flowers have been sent to fill its place. These dumb things that cannot even by their beauty heal the burning thoughts, the cruel suspicions that hurt and tear her breast.

She had flung them from her in a very transport of fury, as her anger waxed hotter within her, and then, with a strange revulsion of feeling, had picked them up again, and pulled out their best leaves and laid them tenderly, if coldly, on the table. What if, after all, she had been mistaken. If! A sorry hope. She had cherished it for a while—an inconsequent five minutes or so—and then had laughed at herself for thus harbouring a sentiment so entirely without life. Would all her bosom's warmth recreate it now? And still it returns again and again with foolish persistence. Oh! to be *sure*—only *sure*—one way or the other!

As Staines' flowers now lie side by side with Branksmere's, where she has laid them down, after a little struggle with her better self, an expression that suggests revenge darkens her face. Here seems to be given her the chance of disdaining her husband's puerile attempt at patching up an injustice, already too far gone to admit of any mending. To discard

his flowers, to openly ignore them and then give honour to his rival's! A sweet revenge indeed. She shivers a little as that word 'rival' forces itself upon her; but she will not turn aside from it, or give a decenter name to her meaning. With a cold sense of self-contempt she declares openly to herself that this lover of hers in the fond, careless, irrecoverable past, is her lover still.

She taps the table impatiently with her fingers, and a quick frown disfigures her brow. Once again she concentrates her thoughts upon the question: which of these bouquets shall she carry to-night? A desire to slight Branksmere, to betray publicly her scorn and loathing of him, is great within her; but within her, too, is a nervous shrinking from the act itself. To abase him is one thing, but to uphold another——

Again that absurd doubt cries aloud for house-room in her heart. It *will* not be killed. At times it may lie scotched, but always life lingers in it. There is no love for her husband to guide and restrain the wayward workings of her soul, but yet some instinct warns her that his dark, determined face hides no evil, and that his eyes have never yet fallen before hers. She is but a woman, too, and her good name is dear to her. As yet no touch of blight has come to it; and—and there is always Margery and pale Angelica, and the boys, and the children—the pretty, fat, innocent twins!

When she gets to this point in her miserable wavering, she clenches her teeth and draws her breath hard. Rising tumultuously to her feet she snatches up the flowers that she, alas! believes to be Branksmere's, and with white lips and trembling fingers goes downstairs.

The other carriages have started ten minutes ago. Lady Anne and Lord Primrose have waited to accompany her. With a little hurried apology for the delay she has caused, and for which Primrose has been devoutly blessing her, they, too, step into the waiting brougham and are driven towards the town, the lights of which can be seen gleaming through the tall lime trees in the eastern walk.

CHAPTER XXVII.

And there's a lust in man no charm can tame,
Of loudly publishing our neighbour's shame.

NIGHT is waning; already day's footsteps lie upon the border of its kingdom. The stars, as though in defiance of their coming foe, are shining with even a keener brilliance than distinguished them an hour ago. The ball is at its height; the waltzes are growing slower and more languorous; the band is becoming impressed by the sad plaints it has been holding forth so long; it begins to excel itself—to become, indeed, quite saturated with melancholy.

It has failed, however, to impress Margery Daryl with a sense of its own sentimental sorrow. She is laughing gaily at this moment at the end of the room, surrounded by quite a little group of admirers, amongst whom are conspicuous Curzon Bellew, a man from Loming Barracks, and little Mr. Goldie, the curate. The county ball is not only a fashionable but a very sociable affair, to which both the rectors and the curates of the towns around are permitted to accompany their womankind without a rebuff being delivered to them next day in the morning papers. Mr. Goldie has no woman-kind of any description, but that hardly matters, and is quite looked over in the general feeling of hilarity and good fellowship that attends on this yearly re-union of the great and small. 'We shall just drop in for a moment or two to get a glimpse of our friends,' the Rector is wont to say annually in his round, jovial voice, but Mr. Goldie's moment or two has grown into hours, so loth is he to drag himself away from the fair Margery.

She is looking more than ordinarily charming to-night in the pretty gown that Willie had given her. She is radiant, happy; many triumphs have fallen to her share, many captives to her innocent bow, that is wrought curiously of sunny smiles and little speeches half shy and half coquettish, and glances from two very wonderful eyes—deep, clear eyes—that brighten and glow and soften as if by magic, sweet eyes that:

Smile constantly, as if they in discreetness,
Kept the secret of a happy dream she did not care to speak.

Peter, too, is in high feather ; and, having given himself into the keeping of Mr. Pauly, is having quite a gay old time of it amongst the prettiest girls in the room. The Hon. Tommy seems determined his protégé shall make a night of it and what between the champagne and the still more exhilarating glances of lovely eyes, and the many incipient heartaches he is enjoying, Peter may honestly be said to be revelling.

‘Your brother seems to me to be—er—going it,’ says Halkett, who just now is amongst pretty Miss Daryl’s followers.

‘Ah ! Peter was “born in a merry hour !”’ returns she laughing. ‘Mark his increasing amiability,’ looking at her brother with the liveliest admiration as she sees him paying open court to a young woman of the Roman-nosed type, who seems a good deal astonished, but decidedly taken with his boyish gaiety.

‘His astounding effrontery, you mean,’ corrects Halkett mildly. ‘I myself with all my seasoning would not take a small fortune to crack jokes with Lady Emma Forbes, which it occurs to me is what he is now doing. I wonder where that boy expects to go to. Watch him—he doesn’t look in the least frightened.’

‘The other way round, rather,’ says Branksmere, who has just joined them, with a little smile.

‘It is cruel. It makes me feel old,’ sighs Halkett mournfully. ‘I can’t keep up with the rising generation ; already they distance me.’ He waves his hand towards the animated Peter. ‘Last time I spent five minutes alone in Lady Emma’s company was in July, ’84. It was an exceptionally warm evening, I remember, yet when those dire five minutes came to an end I was obliged to fly to the nearest kitchen fire to try and impart some heat into my chilled marrow. Yet there is the valiant Peter in the same situation, warm and comfortable.’

‘More than that. Actually enjoying himself. Now he is laughing. And—and so is Lady Emma, by Jove. See !’

‘Laughing ! Oh, no, I won’t believe that. Thanks, no, I had rather not look and be convinced. Laughing ! Lady Emma *laughing* ! Miss Daryl, this is our waltz, I think. Will you kindly take me away ?’

She does so. And passing by Mrs. Amyot, who is holding a court of her own, attracts her attention.

‘Pretty thing, that Margery Daryl is,’ she says, ‘Soft as a crayon sketch. She always seems to me the very incarna-

tion of youth and spring, and freshness and—er—all that sort of thing.'

'You are growing amazingly fresh and youthful yourself,' whispers Mrs. Vyner mischievously. 'What an outburst! What ravishing sentiment! Is all that the result of Halkett's dancing with her?'

'Margery is charming: but not to be named in the same day with her sister, for all that,' remarks Mr. Paulyn, with conviction.

'No? Well, it would ill become me to dispute it. Lady Branksmere is certainly lovely.'

'To a fault,' finishes Mrs. Vyner sweetly.

'That expresses it in a nutshell,' says Primrose laughing. 'She is beautiful, we can all see, and yet—*is* she? One hardly knows, after all. I confess, at all events, it is a beauty that puzzles me. I am Goth enough not to be able to understand it. She is too volcanic—too repressed. One is always wondering when the dénouement will be.'

'Soon, I shouldn't wonder!' lisps Mrs. Vyner, with the most meaningless air in the world.

'It will be curious when it comes. Those intense looking women are generally very trying—very. One cannot conquer a natural anxiety to know if the waking up will produce total extinction, or a new and healthy life.'

'*Social* extinction, did you say?' asks Mrs. Vyner artlessly.

'No! total.'

'It is possible to go too far, Louisa,' says Mrs. Amyot in a low tone, casting a warning glance at her friend.

'Just what I think,' returns that irrepressible person, unmoved, and in a clear voice that has lost a little of its lisp for the occasion. '*Much* too far. My very own sentiments, I assure you. Ah! talk of the dev—an angel, I mean—there goes Lady Branksmere.'

'How that white and gold suits her,' says Mrs. Amyot admiringly. 'White seems a favourite of hers.'

'So does Captain Staines,' laughs Mrs. Vyner demurely, pointing to Muriel's companion.

'Funny selection,' exclaims a tall man of the lanky order, whose hair is a source of undying annoyance to his friends and his coat collars, and whose general appearance is a cross between a Methodist parson and an artist. 'I should call Staines ugly myself.'

'Oh, no! handsome rather.'

'I agree with Varnyshe: ugly, ugly decidedly,' exclaims Lord Primrose with emphasis. 'All the outer veneer he can put on does not blind me to the defects beneath.' He puts his glass aimlessly in his eye, and then drops it again, and altogether looks as disturbed in spirit as a little, plain, good-humoured man can look.

'Ah! Lord Primrose!' murmurs Mrs. Amyot, leaning back to look up at him out of her saucy eyes. 'You grow severe! I shudder to think what will become of *me* when you once see through my—veloutine.'

Her short upper lip curls slowly in a mischievous smile, and knowing herself a pet of his, she makes at him a little *moue*.

'You are a hypocrite to your veloutine,' returns the small man gallantly. 'You pretend it is of service to you when it isn't!' Mrs. Amyot is delighted.

'Ah! Primrose!' cries she, patting the edge of the ottoman, 'you shall have a share of my seat for that. Come, take it. I know you are longing for the repose Mr. Varnyshe is so fond of telling us about.'

Indeed, Mr. Varnyshe has been waxing as eloquent over his favourite theme as his brains will permit, with Lady Branksmere as subject.

The general impression is that of rest,' he is saying, 'but one is hardly safe in believing it. Her eyes, the petulant under lip, mock at it. At the first glance she is an exquisite "still life," if you will, but with a storm brooding on the distant hill-tops.'

The artist sniffs ecstatically, and then blows a sonorous blast upon his poky nose.

'If Lady Branksmere is to be bracketed as a "still life," how may Miss Daryl be designated?' asks Primrose blandly. 'As "an interior"?''

'Yes, yes. Very aptly put. And what a perfect "interior!" All love and peace and grace!'

'You admire Miss Daryl the most, then?' says Mrs. Amyot smiling.

'Ah! Yes!' responds the lanky man, with a loud sigh, that speaks, no doubt, of the full heart. He moves away, his hand thrust in an Irvingian mode into his breast, with the elbow well prominent, and strides into space with flying locks.

'Poor soul!' says Primrose reflectively. 'I fear he is not long for this world. Hanwell will be enriched by him before many months go by.'

'Ever hear any fellow talk of one's inside like him?' bursts out Mr. Paulyn indignantly, who, perhaps, has not altogether grasped his meaning. 'Doooid odd, *I* call it, and before ladies, too. One would think he was the private possessor of a telescope that could see *into* a fellow, eh?'

'Dwell on his many inches and be lenient,' says Mrs. Amyot, when she has laughed a little. 'And bring to mind at the same time your Bacon: "My Lord St. Albans said that nature did never put her precious jewels into a garret four storeys high, and therefore that exceeding tall men had ever very empty heads." Poor Mr. Varnyshe! One feels for him after that. And it isn't my abuse, mind you. I should be afraid to criticise anyone so many miles above me.'

'Mrs. Vyner, we miss you. You have not spoken to us for quite five minutes. Your thoughts? Give us those at least.'

'Alas! I never learned how to think. Mrs. Amyot will tell you so,' lisps she mournfully. 'I was merely looking at the little American woman with the robin's eyes. The Daryls' sister-in-law, I mean.'

'See how she watches Lady Branksmere's every movement,' exclaims Mrs. Amyot amused.

'Or is it Captain Staines? I'm so wretchedly short-sighted,' protests Mrs. Vyner regretfully. 'Do you know I often wonder what it is Captain Staines can possibly have done to her, or she to him; they treat each other with such a rigorous politeness when compelled to speak.'

'Would you have them impolite? How do you treat those with whom *you* are on friendly terms?'

'Ah! *you* should know!' murmurs she reproachfully, glancing up at Paulyn, who is the speaker, and who forthwith breaks into an irresistible laugh. 'I don't scowl at them, at all events, behind their backs. And I have remarked that Captain Staines looks as black as an Ethiopian when Mrs. Daryl's eyes are off him.'

'No wonder! They are very pretty eyes. I suppose he would rather have them on him.'

'That I question.'

'Fancy your remarking anything!' says Mrs. Amyot, in a tone that might be termed satirical.

'That surprises you! Do you know, of late,' ventures Mrs. Vyner meekly, 'it has occurred to me that perhaps I look more stupid than I really am.'

She glances nervously, appealingly around her.

'You must not let that fear trouble you again,' whispers her friend gaily. '*It isn't true!*'

Mrs. Vyner laughs.

'Anybody got their eyes on Aunt Selina?' exclaims Mr. Paulyn at this moment. 'If so, he or she will be richly rewarded. Such spite! such venom could hardly be excelled! I like a thing done well, I confess, be it good or evil. See how she glowers at Muriel. She seems to have made quite a *bête noire* of her of late. Why? I wonder. What's she been doing?'

'That is just what we all want to know,' sighs Mrs. Vyner mildly.

'My gentle aunt has her eye on her to-night with a vengeance, at all events,' says Mr. Paulyn. 'And what an eye it is! As a boy it used to regular crumple me up, and even now it takes the curl out of me. Thank goodness she has taken up a new hobby. As a rule, that eye was dedicated to a discovery of my delinquencies.'

The Hon. Tommy heaves a sigh of deepest relief.

'I'm very sorry if I offend you, Mr. Paulyn,' murmurs Mrs. Vyner with pretty impertinence, 'but I must always regard it as a personal injury that that old lady, your aunt, ever saw the light. Why don't you renounce her?'

'I wouldn't have done you a bit of good if she'd been born blind,' returns Mr. Paulyn gloomily, pretending to misunderstand her. 'She'd have found you out all the same!'

The insouciance of this remark is hardly to be surpassed, and being well understood by the people round is irresistible. Mrs. Amyot, bending over her fan, gives way to silent mirth.

'You were right in what you said yesterday,' she whispers to Mrs. Vyner. 'He is a nice boy.'

'Perhaps if she hadn't been born at all it would have simplified matters,' says Mrs. Vyner, with some faint asperity. 'She is a living nightmare.'

'Puts on her clothes with a pitchfork, and is never happy unless she is taking away somebody's character—shocking habits, both,' murmurs Mrs. Amyot.

'Shocking indeed,' agrees Halkett, who has just come up behind them, glancing at her with meaning.

'Ah, you!' she cries lightly. 'Well, Mentor, and where have you been all this long time? Instructing some new pupil, perchance. We have been discussing Lady Branksmere's charms in comparison with those of her sister. I am pre-

judiced in favour of Margery, I own, but public opinion gives the apple to Lady Branksmere. She is the acknowledged beauty of the room to-night. Yes, Mr. Paulyn, you were right when you said Margery's perfections were eclipsed by those of her sister.'

'Perhaps it will add a little additional interest to that remark of mine to know that it was not made in allusion to Lady Branksmere at all,' returns Mr. Paulyn pleasantly, 'but to Margery's younger sister—Angelica.'

'They are a handsome lot, those Daryls,' says Primrose. 'Beauty seems to run riot amongst them.'

'*And virtue,*' supplements Mrs. Vyner sweetly. As she says this with an ingenuous smile, and quite a generous air, Lady Branksmere, with Staines still beside her, passes by them, and slipping through an open window, disappears into the mystic recesses of the night.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

My soul lies hid in shades of grief.

.

UPON the broad, stone flagged terrace great tubs of odorous evergreens are dotted here and there, casting their perfumes into the dewy darkness. A little harmless baby shower had fallen from heaven about an hour ago, and still the large shining leaves are wet with it, and sparkle softly in the moonbeams. Up above, the pale drifting clouds have been scattered by a wandering wind, and now the Queen of Night is sailing calm and tranquil in the blue ether.

Down in the gardens the tall white lilies are nodding their drowsy heads, and the sweet trailing roses are casting shadows on the closely shaven sward. The air seems burdened with the warm scent of them. Pale discs of light are lying in soft patches on the mossy turf, and now and again a sleepy caw from the distant rookery in Branksmere Woods, that border on the town, is all that comes to break the unutterable calm of the hour.

The tender-coloured night draws hardly breath. It seems more like a sweet twilight than the soft bordering on the lines of a new day, and through the scented darkness a little loving breeze is rushing with gentle petulance.

Far beyond, again, lies the fountain, its sprays rising and falling in a lazy, musical fashion, suggestive of the thought that it would fain slumber, but is driven into action by some tyrannical Pixie, lying laughing in its basin where the big white flowers are glistening amongst their swaying leaves. Muriel, coming to a standstill beside it, seats herself dreamily upon the marble edge, and dreamily still, pulls off her glove and lets her fingers play amongst the opening buds that lie on the water's bosom.

Staines, seating himself beside her, watches her with a curious intentness. Never before, perhaps, has he felt so keenly the power and perfection of her beauty. The mystic hour, the soft breathing of the night, the sense of farness, only rendered more acute by the swelling and dying of the slumbrous waltz that comes to them every now and then upon the midnight wind, all tend to bring passion into life. It seems impossible that anyone should be awake save they two! All the world might indeed be dead, and that sweet, mournful music their requiem, with only two to hear it!

No human voice comes to them; no whisper, only the sighing of the rustling grasses, and the fond cooing of the wood doves. The perfume of the lilies is wafted to them, and *she*, fairer than any lily, is sitting motionless upon the marble basin, her head half turned aside.

Her white gown, with its touches of gold, is making a vivid blot against the dark background of firs. The moonbeams have descended and caught her, and are encircling her with their white flames, playing amongst the folds of her clinging gown, and glancing off the gems that deck her.

Diamonds to fasten the hair and diamonds to fasten the sleeves,
Laces to drip from their rays, like a powder of snow from the eaves.

Presently, as though the silence has reached her even through the armour of strange thoughts that have clothed her, she lifts her head and looks round with an air of one suddenly startled.

'How apart we seem to be,' she says discontentedly.

'I am glad of it,' returns Staines, in a manner hurried, impulsive. It seems to attract her.

'You are changed,' she says, leaning forward and regarding him curiously. 'What is it? The moonlight? It always makes me, too, long to be alone!'

She sighs as one waking from a rapture, and a certain little sense of vague but joyful rest that had sweetened her lips, flies. She looks once again cold, loveless, impassive.

He checks the eager words he would have uttered, and instead, stooping towards her, points to the white flowers she holds.

‘I hardly dared hope so much.’

‘So much?’

‘That you would wear my flowers.’

‘You mistake,’ she says coldly. ‘These are not yours. You will understand,’ quickly, with icy courtesy, ‘that I thought yours charming; that I was much gratified; but I have not used them.’

‘How, then?’ with an admirably puzzled air, ‘you received two bouquets the same?’

‘In effect, yes. But the flowers are different. Yours were lilies, if you remember.’

‘Pardon me,’ smiling pleasantly, ‘mine were heath. Whose the lilies were, I am at a loss to conjecture, but certainly my bouquet was composed of heath.’

Lady Branksmere flushes slowly. She feels perplexed, uncertain. Had she made a mistake? Surely Bridgman had given these flowers last, with his lordship’s compliments. A sudden frown wrinkles her forehead.

‘I do not comprehend,’ she says. ‘Of course there is a mistake somewhere. But,’ steadily, ‘I repeat, I had no idea I was wearing the flowers you so kindly sent me.’

‘Ah! That knowledge I have taken to heart. Pray do not be afraid I shall imagine otherwise,’ returns he, with a touch of pride that is yet sadly humble. ‘I must express my regret that the sorry gift of mine,’ glancing at the flowers, ‘has occasioned you some annoyance. Whoever sent you the other flowers,’ with meaning, ‘is to be envied.’ His tone is almost a question, and it gets its answer.

‘Lord Branksmere sent them,’ returns she quickly, if indifferently. Something in her manner that Staines chooses to translate to his own satisfaction sends a sudden light of triumph to his eyes. To him her hasty answer is equivalent to a desire on her part to relieve him of all jealous fears. She would have him assured that no other man’s flowers had been chosen in preference to his, but that Branksmere’s had been worn through a mere sense of mingled fear and duty.

Her fingers are still in a listless fashion rippling the calm

water of the fountain. Seen by the rays of the ghostly moon, they look like the fingers of a dead hand floating there in their slender whiteness. Staines, stooping over the basin, takes possession of them, and forcibly draws them from the water. The large drops falling from them glisten like jewels. Muriel seems surprised by his action, but not inordinately so.

‘Let my hand go,’ she says haughtily, disdaining to make any physical effort to release herself.

‘In one moment.’ Carefully, and with the utmost tenderness, yet with an obedient haste, he dries the hand he holds—the hand that once had lain in his idly, contentedly, for hours, yet that now chafes and frets at his touch. Perhaps the impatience that thrills through it is not altogether displeasing to him, as he lifts his eyes and intently scans the lowered lids and silent face before him. A sad face, pathetic in its studied coldness, that hides as if with a mask the workings of its owner’s heart. Have her thoughts travelled backward, too, to those old days of despised freedom, when poverty was the chief sorrow with her, and she lived in the midst of a merry tangle of boys and girls, and when there was one outside who——

She comes back to the present with a sharp sigh as Staines lays her hand now dry upon her lap.

‘Don’t put it in again,’ he says quietly. ‘It is still early in the year, and the water is chilly. You may catch cold.’

‘I never catch cold,’ absently, ‘as you may remember.’

She regrets the words even as they pass her lips, and the opportunity they afford him. He seizes upon it eagerly.

‘Remember!’ he repeats, in a tone of strongly repressed passion. ‘When shall I forget, I wonder! What is there in all the sweet days we passed together that I do *not* remember? Yet,’ eagerly, ‘do not misunderstand me. Do not for an instant imagine that I regret one single hour. Memory is now the only good that life has left in me. The memory,’ his voice sinks to a low tone full of pathos, ‘of a priceless past!’

‘Let the past lie,’ returns she coldly. ‘What have we to do with it? It is gone, dead. No effort, however violent, can bring it within our grasp again.’

‘I have at least one solace in my desolation,’ says Staines, in a low tone. ‘And that is the knowledge that I suffer alone. It is, it *shall* be,’ vehemently, ‘a lasting comfort for me to know that you are as free from regrets as I am overshadowed by them.’

'Shadows are movable things,' with a faint shrug of her shoulders. 'It seems to me that at times you can emerge from yours with a very tolerable success.'

'Ay, but they always follow one. In reality (though one may deceive one's self at times) there is no escape from them. But be happy in the thought that they do not trouble you—that those old days so dear to me are by you remembered but as a foolish, passing dream.'

'Would you have me believe you unhappy?' demands she scornfully.

'I would have you believe nothing displeasing to you. Mould your beliefs according to your fancy.'

'I have none. I have lost all beliefs,' declares she, with a reckless defiance. 'But don't waste time over that speech. You look as though you had something to say. Say it.'

'You are wrong. I never felt more tongue-tied in my life. I could tell you nothing that is not already old and weary news to you. That I *have* loved, that I *do* love, that I shall love you and you only—for ever and ever!'

His tone is so calm, so entirely wanting in the vehemence that disturbs, that she seems scarcely called upon to rise and forbid his further utterance. She sits quite mute, with her eyes downcast, and her fingers tightly laced lying in her lap.

'It is an uninteresting tale, is it not?' continues he quietly. 'All on the one string. Yet for me it has variations. I can make my torture a little keener now and then by a careful reminding of myself that the woman for whom I would have bartered every hope I possess, deliberately, of her own free will, severed between us every tie.'

'“For whom you would have bartered *all*?” Why did you never protest so much as that in those old days you are so fond of recalling?' inquires she, with a sudden cold sneer.

'I thought I had protested more. I believed my soul as open to your gaze as I had madly dreamed yours was to mine. I saw no necessity for words. I,' dejectedly, 'was mistaken upon both points. My failure was my own fault, no doubt, but it is none the less bitter for that.'

'If, indeed, you feel as you now pretend, you should never have come to this house,' declares she, with slow distinctness, but he can see that she is trembling.

'I know that now, but then—— How could I tell—how be sure how it was with me until I saw you again?' He is speaking with extreme agitation; at this moment, indeed, he

is sincere enough, and the woman before him, standing gazing at him with head erect, in all her cold, imperious beauty, seems to him the one desirable thing on earth. He had almost denied the truth to Madame von Thirsk, had refused at least to acknowledge it, yet certainly the honestest love he had ever known had been called into existence by Muriel Daryl. The girl, he had accounted charming, a prize worth any man's winning, yet that first love of his had sunk into insignificance beside the passionate admiration he had felt on seeing her as Lady Branksmere. The gorgeous setting of her new life had so suited her and enhanced her every beauty, that the memory of the girl grew dim before the splendour of the woman.

He admires her—finding a fresh charm even in her very insolence towards him—covets her daily, hourly, and with his growing passion for her, encourages also a settled detestation of the man who, to use his own thoughts, has stolen her from him. That she is mistress of the best affection he has to offer is beyond question, but that affection just falls short of what a true lover's should be, in that his love for himself is by many degrees stronger than his love for her could ever be. Still, his regard for her is great enough to throw passion into his voice and a certain fire into his handsome eyes.

'It seems to me,' he goes on vehemently, 'as though I *should* come; as though with my own eyes I must see you, if only once again.' He pauses.

'And?' Her tone is stern, almost bitter, but her lips are white.

'Now I know,' returns he brokenly, 'my love still lives—nay, has grown a thousand-fold in its vain strength. I have learned that time holds no hope for me. That I am as sick of life as a man may well be!'

'Why do you stay here if you are so unhappy?' cries she suddenly. 'Why don't you go?' She rises and stretches out her hand with a quick, impulsive meaning. 'Go, I beseech you,' she exclaims feverishly, and with such an eager desire in her tone that one might easily believe her to be entreating more for herself than him.

'I cannot! Some power chains me to this spot. It is a fear, undefined as yet, but it is too strong for me—it holds me here.'

'A mere morbid fancy,' returns she, regarding him fixedly. 'You should despise such vague warnings.'

‘Not when they point towards you!’ She pales perceptibly and would have spoken, but seeing the haughty curve her lips have taken, the scorn in her eyes of all danger for herself, and yet underneath all that, the lurking terror that his words have called forth, to the very blanching of her face, he prevents her answer and hurries on deliberately.

‘If I could manage to forget, or to be indifferent, I might indeed make my escape; but that is impossible. Nor would I care for such oblivion. For,’ with an impatient sigh—

Even though I’ve shattered my skiff on the rocks,
The voyage was sweet while it lasted.

No! I would not forget. The very voyage that wrecked my happiness will always be the dearest memory I have.’

‘It is folly—madness,’ cries she angrily. ‘You should go.’

‘Are those your orders?’ demands he sadly. ‘Do not enforce them. And there is another thing,’ he draws near her in an agitated haste and his voice sinks to a whisper, ‘how can I go and leave you here alone, surrounded by those who, at least, bear you no good-will?’

He breaks off abruptly as if in sore distress, but in reality to mark the effect of his words. She has stepped back from him, and her hand has dropped downwards and is clinging tightly to the cold edge of the marble basin.

‘Give voice to whatever is in your mind,’ she commands him, in a high, clear tone. But though her tone is steady, there is something wild and strained in the glance that accompanies it. What is it he is about to say to her? ‘Are you afraid to put your insinuations into plain words? The worst enemies, they tell us, are those of one’s household; who is it you would bid me distrust! Speak!—Branksmere? His grandmother?—or, perhaps—’ she draws her breath sharply, and the squareness of her mouth becomes more pronounced—‘Madame von Thirsk?’

‘You give me my opportunity,’ exclaims he eagerly. ‘Madame von Thirsk! Do not trust her; I know but little, I have no right to judge, but do not, I implore you, place faith in that woman.’

A deadly chill passes over Muriel. Her own suspicions thus echoed by another seem to enlarge them at once to a gigantic size. But yet he may know nothing of that darker fear of hers, of that shameful doubt that possesses her soul by

night and day. A terrible longing that this last indignity may be spared her, nerves her to answer him.

'I fancied you were Madame's friend,' she says, in a tone she vainly strives to render careless. 'Did I not see you talking to her just now? It appeared to me that you held very amicable relations with her. I was wrong?'

'How can I say whether you are right or wrong? She has given me no reason to be otherwise than outwardly friendly with her. It is only some hidden instinct that bids me watch her, for *your sake*.' He hesitates openly, and then leans towards her in an impulsive way, that adds a double and most sinister meaning to his words. 'I would be rid of this accursed doubt,' he says in a low, condensed tone; 'tell me—you, who should know—what is it there is—*between her and—Branksmere?*'

Muriel leans heavily against the fountain; no answer falls from her lips. It is all over, then. The disgrace is known! Those miserable fears of hers were only too well grounded! A sense of suffocation threatens to overpower her. She feels giddy, and a strange, buzzing noise ringing through her brain distracts her. She is not conscious until afterwards that in this instant of agony she has unconsciously flung out her hand and laid it, with a terrible trembling in it, on Staines' arm, a trembling that betrays her. Instinctively, as it were, she has turned to him for support, for succour. His pulses throb with unusual force as he recognises this fact, and closes his own fingers firmly over the beautiful slender ones that came to him of their own accord.

Then in a moment it all passes away—her agitation, the anguish, the deadly shame. All is gone from her and she is herself again, save for an additional pallor in her cheeks and a strained passion of fear in the grey eyes.

'Must no man dare to have an old friend?' she asks, with an attempt at lightness that is only a miserable failure. Her strength is insufficient for her whilst his eyes pierce her thoughts, and after a last wild struggle with herself she breaks down utterly, and buries her face in her hands.

'My beloved! That *you* should have to endure all this!' murmurs Staines in a tone so low, so replete with all a lover's fond indignation, that it is barely audible; yet it thrills through her.

And then in a moment, as it were, his arms are round her, and he has pressed her bowed head down upon his breast.

She lies there passive. At this time, when her soul is sick within her, it seems to her as if there was nothing at all that mattered. What are honour, loyalty, faith? Words—all words! Nothing remains but the knowledge that all the world is at liberty now to jeer at her, and point a finger of scorn at her—the despised wife. Good Heavens! can such things be for her—Muriel Daryl?

Oh, the old days! The happy days! When she reigned as a minor queen over them all! When love brightened her path. Oh, to be loved again! To be able to forget this part that has been assigned her—the rôle of a woman neglected by him who should be her guide and guardian and protector.

And *this* man loves her! This man whose affection had seemed to her a little cold, a little careless, in the past. She had wronged him there. Now in the hour of her desolation it seems good to her that love should not be altogether denied her, that it may yet be hers, no matter in how sorry a guise it comes. To her, love is a pure and holy thing—passion has no part in it. To be deemed the one thing needful, the best, the dearest possession life can afford, by one human creature, is all she desires. Ghosts of a dead sweetness rise before her, springing to life again beneath the burden of her grief. Must she with her own hands crush them back into their graves again? Is *everything* to be denied her? Why should she so greatly dread the world; what can it give her save its pity? She literally writhes beneath this thought, and a sharp sob escapes her.

Oh! to fling it all from her. To rush into another, freer life. To breathe again! And here is a door open to her—a means of escape.

All at once a revulsion seizes upon her; she drags herself out of his arms and stands back from him. With slow, shuddering gasps she catches her breath. Of what had she been thinking—*she*? A terror had fallen upon her, strange, vivid, horrible; a looking into herself that has changed and darkened her face, and made her look like an incarnate fear! Whither is she drifting?

‘Muriel, you shall not feel it like this,’ cries Staines, shocked at the expression of her eyes. ‘Hear me!’

‘Nay, sir; be satisfied!’ breathes she heavily. ‘Am I not degraded enough? At your bidding all was forgotten. I do not see how I am to look any one of them in the face again.’

She is not thinking of the guests within, but of Margery—

pure, sweet, merry Margery—and of all the other girls and boys who call her sister.

‘Let us talk sense,’ says Staines, with a sudden roughness that, under the circumstances, is only kind. ‘The question now is how I can help you. I have nothing to offer—nothing save my devotion.’

‘I want nothing from you,’ cries she passionately. ‘*That* least of all. Did the whole world combine, do you think it could avenge such a case as mine? And you, of all others, how *dare* you offer me help? You, to whom I have shown—’ Further words refuse to pass her lips, and he, perhaps, slightly misunderstands the thing she would have said. ‘No—no help from you to me is possible,’ she says presently. ‘Be sure of that. I will accept nothing at your hands.’

She is white as death, and her great stormy eyes are flashing. They fall upon the flowers she is still mechanically holding, and with a gesture of intense scorn she dashes them to the ground and treads them under foot. She turns upon him like an outraged queen.

‘Oh, that I could so trample out of sight all that troubles me,’ she cries, her fingers plucking convulsively at the soft laces that lie upon her bosom.

As she so stands, beautiful in her grief and her cruel self-contempt, a soft, low laugh rings through the shrubbery upon her left.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Woman's at best a contradiction still.

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‘THIS retreat of yours is a positive sanctuary,’ says Halkett, dropping leisurely on to a three-legged stool, with all the air of a man who has worn himself out in the performance of his duty. It is very dusky in this corner of the balcony, and there is something soothing in the thought that everyone is dancing in the rooms within, and that one's own body is idly resting. He has addressed Margery Daryl, but there are two or three others lounging in this quiet, forgotten little spot, hemmed in by the tall shrubs in their huge pots. There is enough light falling on them from within to cast a faint radiance on their darkness, and to make the different faces known

to a person with good sight. But not enough to disturb the repose of the scene.

Mrs. Daryl is sitting on the sill of the curtained window; Curzon Bellew is leaning over Margery's chair. Peter, and a tall artillery-man called Herrick, who has for months been rendered morose by an absorbing passion for Miss Daryl, are leaning against the ivy, madly regardless of the earwigs, and Peter's last pretty partner is amusing herself with him from the depths of a cushioned lounge that, with the aid of a big red fan, almost conceals her from view.

'If a sanctuary, who gave you permission to invade it?' asks Margery gaily. She has been particularly right-minded up to this rather late hour, and Curzon's soul has been quieted within him, but now, all suddenly as it seems, she wakes into a wicked life, and, sitting more upright, turns a bewildering smile on Halkett. There is always a little standing flirtation between them, though she well knows where his heart is buried, and he knows he is less than nothing to her when once the friendship boundary is passed; still, for the purpose of teasing other attendant swains, Halkett, as Miss Daryl uses him, is invaluable.

'What an unkind speech! Have I not flown to you for refuge? And is this the spirit in which my prayer is received? Seeing you not alone, Miss Daryl, or even *à deux*, I took the liberty——'

'Oh! that is nothing. You are always taking that,' retorts she, with a pretty pretence at scorn that finds its end in the little laugh, tuneful and sweet. 'The question is, what brought you?'

'Need you ask?' reproachfully. 'You know I am always unhappy when——'

'She proves untrue!' This speech is a whisper and has allusion to Mrs. Amyot, but to Curzon and the tall man next him it is full of sinister meaning, and creates within them a ravening desire for blood.

'She always does,' says Halkett, ignoring the allusion, and looking sentimentally at her. 'Who should know it so well as you?'

'Who, indeed!'

'Yet you have most cruelly deserted me all to-night; most wantonly you have flung me amongst the Philistines. That I still live is no merit of yours. And all the time you have been dreaming here, or in some other fortunate spot, whilst he who would die to—to——'

'Yes. Don't let it embarrass you; I know all the rest,' puts in Miss Daryl kindly.

'You should! You have served an apprenticeship to it. But to-night's success should not render you unmindful of the pangs of others. To know that all the world is grovelling at your feet might make you merciful instead of cruel.'

'Perhaps you think you are amusing me?' with a soft, disdainful uplifting of her dainty chin, and a little dimpling smile.

'My natural self-conceit never carried me as far as that.'

'That is just as well.'

'I don't think you are in a very pretty temper to-night. A generous mistress uses the lash sparingly to her slaves.'

'Her favourite slaves perhaps. Besides, who told you I ever was in a pretty temper?'

'No one. I think myself, so far as I am concerned, you never are.'

'The lady of your heart is *always* good-tempered, of course?' There is another innuendo in this remark; Mrs. Amyot at times being a little impetuous, to say the least of it.

'No. Have I not just this moment told you she never is—to me?'

Miss Daryl makes a little grimace.

'The object of *your* affections,' she begins saucily, but he interrupts her.

'Oh, Miss Daryl! "The object!" For my sake, if not for your own, refrain! I really cannot sit silent and hear you call yourself names.'

Wilhelmina in the background (who has been kindly striving to keep the gloomy artilleryman from manslaughter) here so far forgets her self-imposed mission as to burst out laughing. Margery follows suit, and presently Mr. Halkett, though with a carefully aggrieved air, joins in also.

'Now, where does the joke come in?' demands he mournfully.

'That is what we all want to know,' says Curzon, speaking for the first time. As he makes this chilling remark he throws up his head, and yawns in a bored way, very successfully.

'All! I don't,' says Margery gaily, glancing at the unresponding Bellew from under her long lashes.

'No? You are happy, then, in not being a prey to the unsatisfied curiosity that is consuming me.'

'I am so far a prey to curiosity that I am dying to know

what you mean,' says Margery teasingly, who ought to be ashamed of herself.

'I should think my meaning has always been perfectly clear to you,' returns he, with a steady glance that fails to disconcert her in the very least. 'By-the-by, this is our dance, I believe.'

'Is it? I—I don't think I want to dance,' returns she. Halkett has gone over to talk to Mrs. Daryl, so that she and Curzon are virtually alone.

'Don't you? I wonder, then, why you come here,' says Mr. Bellew, in a practical tone. 'The business of a ball is dancing; one can sit and doze at home.'

'There are other things besides dancing.'

'True! There is flirting,' says he bitterly, which remark establishes a coldness in the conversation that lasts for many minutes. It is still at freezing point when Tommy Paulyn, unattached, runs lightly up the steps to their left and precipitates himself upon them.

'What are you all doing here in the dark?' asks he, in a loud, cheerful tone that seems to dissipate the peaceful gloom at once. Shade to Mr. Paulyn means dulness, and dulness death. 'All in the dumps, eh?' with a glance at Margery and Bellew. 'Been to the gardens? They are looking lovely. Try 'em and take my advice, they'd kill your blues in a hurry.'

'Did they cure yours, Tommy? Was that why you sought them?' demands Margery, oh! so sweetly.

'No, my dear, I leave the vapours to such thinly-minded little girls as yourself. I defy any man, woman, or child to affect *my* nerves. To devilled oysters alone that proud boast belongs. But, seriously, the gardens are awfully well got up. Lamps everywhere, and stars and things. Never saw such a satisfactory moon anywhere. The committee ought to be congratulated on its arrangements. They ought to be presented with a Bible or something.'

'Not good enough,' says Miss Daryl. 'According to your account they have managed even the heavens admirably. I don't see what could repay them.'

'Will you come and look at them?' asks Curzon, meaning the gardens not the committee, conquering himself a little, in his fear that Halkett will be before him. 'It is a charming night, quite sultry.'

'Cold, I should have thought,' replies she, who had certainly never thought about it at all until she saw her

lover's eyes fixed imploringly upon her, and heard the note of activity in his tone.

'Pouf!' exclaims Mr. Paulyn lightly. 'I like to hear you beginning to be careful of your health. You aren't more delicate than Muriel, are you? and she has been enjoying the midnight breeze with Staines for the last hour.' Tommy says this quite gaily, being ignorant of any reason (or at all events unmindful) why she should not so enjoy herself. He is blind also to the fact that the smile has died away from Margery's lips, and a curious gleam has sprung to life in the eyes of Mrs. Daryl.

Oblivious of the different storms his words have raised he rattles on gaily to whoever will kindly listen, and under cover of his converse, Bellew once more appeals to Margery.

'Come!' he says earnestly. This time without a word she rises, as though glad of a chance of escape, and moves slowly, listlessly, down the steps into the scented darkness beyond. In silence, as though weighed down by some painful thought, she goes, and he makes no attempt to break in upon her voiceless mood, until most of the paths have been traversed and the hope is borne in upon him that her fears are not to be realised.

'What a fellow your cousin is to talk,' he says then, with a very successful air of indifference. 'I quite thought by what he said that Lady Branksmere was somewhere out here; didn't you, eh?'

'I know Tommy and the wildness of his surmisings better than you do,' returns she evasively, but a great calm and comfort have come to life within her breast, born not only of his words but of the fact that Muriel is really nowhere to be seen. How foolish she was to place any dependence upon any words of Tommy's. One should be badly off indeed for a reliable authority on any subject, to go to him for intelligence! With the restoration of her peace of mind returns also her sense of aggravation. And it is at this very moment that Bellew chooses to make a rather unfortunate remark.

'You look pale,' he says solicitously. I suppose it would have ended very much the same way if he had said she looked red, as her relieved feelings are ambitious of a quarrel; and, besides, that last insinuation of his on the balcony is rankling afresh in her mind now the greater weight has been lifted.

'I am sorry I can't look like a dairymaid to oblige you,' she says, with an ominous calm. 'However, if my appearance

offends you I must try to correct it.' She lifts her hands and administers to her poor cheeks a very vigorous scrub that almost brings the tears to her eyes. A swift, stinging flush rises to her face. 'Now, are you satisfied?' she asks, irately—the 'scrub' having hurt her in a measure—turning to him a wrathful, crimson countenance.

'I don't know what you mean. I can't see why you should speak to me like this,' says Mr. Bellew in an injured tone. 'When did I express myself as dissatisfied with your face? To me,' with angry honesty, 'as you well know, it is the most beautiful face in the world.'

'There is a certain class of people whom I detest,' returns Miss Daryl unpleasantly, uplifting her pretty nose in a contemptuous fashion. 'You are one of them. Flattery is their strong weapon, and I'm sure you've been paying me meaningless compliments ever since I was born.'

'Born!' with a rather derisive laugh. 'You can remember since then?'

'I have often heard,' icily, 'that there are few so clever as those who have at command an unlimited amount of repartee. Experience has taught me that there are also few so—wearying.' She turns upon him eyes that are half veiled by their long lashes, and very aggressive.

'If I bore you,' says Mr. Bellew, whose temper by this time is almost as agreeable as her own, 'it is most unreasonable of me to inflict my presence on you any longer. Will you come back to the house, or will you stay here whilst I tell Halkett——'

'There! I *knew* it!' breaks she in scornfully. 'Anything like your abominable jealousy I have never yet known! Your rudeness to *me* just now upon the balcony I pass over—I am accustomed to it—but your rudeness to that very inoffensive person does call for comment.'

'How was I rude, may I ask?'

'Do you then deny you were in a raging temper all the time he was—was courteously endeavouring to entertain me?'

'Openly endeavouring to make love to you, you mean,' exclaims Bellew, his long suppressed wrath now fairly boiling over. 'Do you think I am blind, or a fool, that I can't see through things? I tell you you were encouraging him in a disgraceful fashion, and that he seemed only too glad of the encouragement.'

'I must be a modern Venus,' says Miss Daryl composedly, 'to inspire all the different men you mention at odd times with a due appreciation of my charms. To-day it was Mr. Herrick; yesterday Lord Primrose; to-night Mr. Halkett. Poor people! It would cause them some slight embarrassment, I should say, were they to be openly accused of their crime.'

'It is not only——' begins he with increasing anger, but she interrupts him mischievously.

'Not only those I have named? True! there is still Mr. Goldie, who has also come under your ban. Even that estimable man, that small pillar of the Church, cannot escape your censure.'

'To sneer at me, Margery, is not to convince me. I have loved you too long to be callous on this point. If an end to my dreamings has come, I would know it.' He lays his hand on her shoulders and turns her forcibly to such a position as enables the pale moon to play more earnestly upon her face. 'It is my belief that at last you have decided on throwing me over to marry some other man.'

'Which of them,' demands she, shaking herself free of his angry clasp. 'Mr. Halkett, who is head over ears in love with Mrs. Amyot, or Lord Primrose, who has neither eyes nor ears for anyone save Lady Anne?'

'There are others,' says he with a very determined face, ignoring her burst of wrath. 'There is Herrick, and——' She has changed colour perceptibly, and started a little.

'Yes, Herrick,' he reiterates in a despairing tone, that is still warm with indignation. 'See when I mention his name how you change colour.'

'I suppose I can change colour if I choose. Is a blush a sin?' asks she, looking at him from the shadow into which she has wisely retreated.

'No. But I will tell you what is. The deliberate breaking of a man's heart. I have loved you all my life, I think, through your scorn and indifference, and you suffered me, only to tell me now you are going to marry Herrick.'

'I am not going to tell you anything,' cries she indignantly, and, to say the truth a little hypocritically. 'Am I a Mary Baxter, who "refused a man before he axed her?" Am I?'

'Did you refuse him?'

'How could I,' evasively, 'if he didn't give me the opportunity?'

‘You give me your word he did not propose to you?’

Thus driven to bay, Miss Daryl once more resorts to righteous anger.

‘Even if he did, if they *all* did, what is that to you?’ she demands, with her lovely eyes aflame. ‘You are not my father, or my brother, or my guardian, that you should take me to task—and certainly you shall *never* be my husband!’

This terrible speech seems to take all heart out of Bellew. He stands as though stricken into stone, except for the rapid gnawing of his moustache. Until this moment, in spite of his vehement reproaches, it had never seemed really possible to him that all might indeed be over between him and her. Does she mean it? Can she? His eyes are riveted upon the sward that, sparkling with moonlit gems, lies at his feet. Will she speak again? Does she guess how he is enduring torments? If she moves away what is he to do—to follow, to implore, or to resign all hope, finally?

The moments fly by unchecked. To Margery his silence is almost as inexplicable as hers to him.

If she repents the severity of her speech, however, her countenance by no means reveals the fact. There is nothing of the culprit about her, no smallest shadow of regret darkens her charming face.

‘If,’ she declares to herself, with undiminished rage, ‘he should stand there, mooning, until the day breaks, I shall not be the first to speak!’

She has taken up her fan and detached it from the ribbon that holds it, and is opening and shutting it in an idle, inconsequent fashion that to the man watching her, with moody, despairing eyes, is maddening. It startles her in spite of her hankering after stoicism, when she finds it roughly taken from her careless fingers and flung to a considerable distance.

‘Have you nothing to say to me?’ asks he passionately.

‘Nothing,’ returns she calmly, although her heart is beating.

‘Do you know you have told me that all things are at an end between us?’

He is speaking very quietly, and her heart begins to beat even faster, with a more untameable speed.

‘Well!’ cries she pettishly. ‘It is all your own fault. I won’t have people jiggling about after me, and pretending to

look the deepest concern when there is no cause for it. There is nothing on earth so tiresome as being asked every moment whether one has a headache, or if one's neuralgia is worse; or if some iced water wouldn't do one good!

'And all this,' remarks Mr. Bellew, with mournful reproach, addressing the listening roses, 'has arisen out of my simple declaration that I thought she was looking a little pale!'

Miss Daryl changes colour, fights a short battle with her gravity, and finally bursts into open mirth.

'I have been a cross goose, certainly,' she confesses with heroic candour; 'but never mind. We are friends again now, aren't we?'

'We are not,' returns he.

'Oh! that as you will, of course,' stiffly; 'but I thought——'

'I am your lover,' declares he stoutly. 'Nothing you could do or say would alter that fact. You can throw in the friend and welcome. But your lover I am, before and above all else. And so I shall remain whether you wed me, or some other man, or if you never marry at all.'

'Do you know I think it will be that,' says she, alluding to the last part of his speech. 'I am sure I shall never marry—never!'

'Shall we walk on a little further?' asks Bellew, in the severe tone of one who wishes to impress you with the belief that he considers you are talking folly.

They stray beyond the pleasant garden, past numerous groups of wanderers like themselves, and gleaming statues, not always in the strictest taste, to the shrubbery that lies to the right of all these, in the well-planned public gardens so dear to the hearts of the citizens.

'I really think, Curzon,' says Margery gaily, who has quite recovered herself, shooting a charmingly saucy glance at him from her adorable eyes, 'that there is one small thing for which an apology is due from you to me. What was that little insinuation of yours about flirting, eh? You didn't mean it—h'm?'

She has the prettiest way in the world of uttering that unspellable question, and Curzon goes down before it. Nevertheless, with a last effort at maintaining his self-respect, he makes a poor pretence of not understanding her.

'Flirting!' he repeats, with a vague air that would not

have imposed on an infant. 'I'm sure I shouldn't say or mean anything intentionally that would hurt you.'

'That's all very well,' replies she persistently. 'But the thing is, did you mean *that*? I'm not a flirt, Curzon, am I? And you don't think so, do you?'

There is no getting out of this. Mr. Bellew, being brought to bay, surrenders with the basest cowardice.

'Of course not,' he says hastily. 'I must have—have been a fool when I said that.'

'Only then?' mischievously.

'Then and now and always when I am with you,' returns he vehemently, perhaps a little sadly.

'I thank you for giving me your choicest hours!' says she, with a little grimace. And then: 'After all, how could I expect you to give me of your best, I, who am so bent on being an old maid?'

'You, who are so bent on breaking my heart!' replies he gloomily.

Miss Daryl laughs—a soft tuneful laugh that rings through the cool night air. As she laughs she moves, and parting the thick screen of leaves that hides her from the fuller view beyond, steps on to the shorn plateau clad only with moonbeams, that is musical with the sound of the dripping fountain.

As she looks straight before her the laughter dies upon her lips. Her smile grows frozen. There—*there* in the moonlight—only a few yards from her, stands Muriel, her face pale, ashen, all the marks of passionate despair upon her beautiful face, and there, too, stands—Staines.

CHAPTER XXX.

Who makes quick use of the moment is a genius of prudence.

THE whole thing is over in a moment. Margery, like one stunned, steps back again behind the kindly shelter of the evergreens, and Curzon (who, too, has seen and comprehended all) follows her rapidly, anxiously, in her hasty walk back to the house.

Not a word or sigh escapes her, yet he, loving her, knows the agony her heart is enduring, and understands but too well

the degradation and horror that is possessing her. Her lips have grown white and fixed, her glance is stern, all the pretty, petulant playfulness seems killed within her, and her breath comes heavily. Her fingers are so tightly clenched around her fan that he can see through the gloves the very shape of her nails.

To induce her to break through this cruel reserve that is still deeper augmenting her sorrow, becomes to Bellew an imperative duty ; and at last, coming to a shaded spot, where they two are virtually alone, he lays his hand gently on her arm, and draws her towards him.

‘Don’t take it so hardly, darling,’ he says very tenderly, though secretly rather anxious as to how his interference will be received. Will she resent it and turn from his sympathy coldly? There is a pause full of doubt, and then—all at once—Margery turns to him and lays her head upon his breast and bursts into a passion of silent tears.

‘Oh, Curzon!’ exclaims she in a bitter tone, clinging to him in the abandonment of the moment.

‘There is a great deal of unhappiness in the world, Margery; but you must not take things to heart as though there were no hope, no remedy.’ He has his arms round her, and as he speaks he stoops and presses his lips softly to her pretty hair. Is he not her lover? Is she not the one dear, sacred thing to him upon earth? ‘How can we tell what Muriel was enduring just now? One cannot altogether stifle one’s heart beats, and if she was bidding an eternal farewell to the first love of her life we should feel nothing but pity for her.’

He is not entirely sure of the genuineness of the picture he has conjured up for her comfort, but he dreads her dwelling too strongly on the fear that has evidently taken possession of her. And in truth Muriel’s ghastly face and strained attitude might as readily belong to the guilty woman, as to her who is for ever renouncing the one sweet treasure of her past.

‘Oh! that I could dare believe you,’ murmurs Margery sobbingly. ‘But my heart misgives me!’

Nevertheless she is comforted in a measure, and presently enters the house again with him, unhappy still, but soothed and softened, and with a vague recognition of the fact that his tenderness has been very pleasant to her. All joy to be derived from her evening is, however, gone, and she subsides

languidly into a fauteuil in an ante-room to wait with listless patience for the moment when Wilhelmina will summon her to cloak herself and accompany her home. Of two things she remains ignorant, that Mrs. Daryl had been standing near the entrance by which she regained the ball-room, and had noticed with wonder the lingering traces of distress upon her face, and that Lady Branksmere had followed hard upon her footsteps and had re-entered the house almost as she did, and by the same route.

Muriel had caught sight of her sister on her homeward way, and had told herself she never could be devoutly grateful enough that the girl had not chanced to see her at the fountain as she stood there transfixed with horror of herself, with the first terrible touch of despair upon her face. That Margery had seen and judged blindly but correctly of the miserable truth, did not reveal itself to her. But even now as she steps again into the brilliant glare of the lamps she looks round nervously for the slender, lissome figure of the girl, and knows a sense of relief when her eyes fail to meet it.

Wilhelmina she meets with a friendly smile, and hardly pausing to notice her expression (which, however, is worthy of thought), moves on to where the lace draperies of the windows form a frame for her. Staines, coming to a standstill behind her, looks round him and in turn meets Mrs. Daryl's rather impressive gaze.

'Take care!' she whispers, in a curious voice; 'you remember our compact. I will be silent only so long as you give me no cause to speak.'

Elevated by the sense of triumph that is still warm within him, he disdains all answer to this warning, only saluting her with an almost defiant, and certainly ironical bow.

'As you will,' returns she, still in a low tone, 'but at least remember you are warned!'

He laughs insolently, and returns her gaze with an unembarrassed air. Something in his manner strikes cold to the heart of Wilhelmina. Is he so sure, then? Will her interference be of no use? Has it gone so far as that? It seems to her at this moment that the other woman is nothing to her, but Margery, *she* will suffer. The memory of the pretty white face that had passed her a few minutes ago returns to Mrs. Daryl with a vividness that is actual pain. The girl's tender heart will be racked and torn for no fault of her own, but because of—

She becomes conscious that Staines is still gazing at her with that mocking smile upon his lips, and with a glance at him, so full of scorn and hatred that it should have warned him though her words failed, she falls back once more into the shadow of the window.

Staines, moving up to Lady Branksmere's side, addresses her eagerly. No syllable had passed between them as they walked in a strange silence back from the fountain, but now he ventures to speak.

'At least do me the justice to understand I did not mean to offend you,' he says in a low tone, replete with humility.

'What is offence?' muses she wearily. 'No one, it seems to me, has power to hurt me, save I myself. Yes,' turning her large eyes fully upon him, 'I exonerate you from all blame.'

Her generosity should have disarmed him at least for the moment and taught him forbearance, but such vulgar sentiment is unknown to him.

'Ah! to be *sure* of your forgiveness,' he murmurs eagerly. To her, his eagerness is but a form of honest, lingering regret, and her eyes grow softer, kinder, as she watches him.

'Be sure, then,' she says, very gently.

'Give me a proof,' entreats he. 'To-morrow the others are all going to the tennis affair at Lady Blount's. Are you, too, going?'

'No!' with a surprised glance; 'I have decided against it long ago. Tennis bores me. But what has that to do with—'

'To assure me of your pardon,' interrupts he quickly, 'say you will permit me, too, to set aside the invitation for to-morrow, and to accompany you instead in your afternoon walk. I feel that I have sinned in your sight. That you might in time learn to look askance at me; and all such fears mean death! But if the coming hours hold out to me some hope I shall surmount my fears; I shall know there is still life for me. Believe me, I shall not sin again!'

His whole manner is so deferential, so humble, so mild, that she is touched by it.

'To-night was a mistake, certainly,' she says, 'but, as I have already told you, I absolve you from all blame. Yes; to-morrow, if you wish, you can walk with me.'

She sighs. Indeed, all through her manner there is a suspicion of mental fatigue. Turning her face from him she

looks listlessly around her, and as her eyes travel from wall to wall she becomes at last aware that Branksmere is watching her from a distant doorway with a burning, immovable gaze.

She starts visibly, and is conscious of growing nervous and unsettled beneath it. She compels herself to sever her glance from his, but presently her eyes go back to him in spite of herself, to find he has withdrawn his scrutiny and is now apparently wrapt in contemplation of something at the farthest end of the hall. There is, however, a set expression about his firmly-closed lips, suggestive of possibilities hardly wise to develop before an admiring public, and a certain rigidity of jaw that should be marked dangerous.

He had been aware that the flowers his wife held were not those sent to her by him from the moment she had emerged from the cloak-room, but he had been far from imagining whose gift they were until enlightened in a charmingly airy and casual manner by Madame von Thirsk somewhat later on. To the ordinary observer it would hardly appear that Branksmere was a careful husband, yet the ordinary observer would probably have been astonished could he know with what precision every movement of his wife is known to him. And just now he is chafing silently beneath the knowledge that Muriel has spent the last hour in Staines' undisputed society amidst the romantic accessories of a moon-lit garden.

A very tumult of mixed passions is swaying him. That she shall give him an explanation he is determined. But not now. Not to-night. He has written to her, and considering to-night's work she will hardly dare deny him the interview he has demanded on the morrow. Already the night is far spent. In a few short hours he will be face to face with her, and will get an answer to the questions that are clamouring for utterance.

Perhaps he is hardly aware with what strange earnestness his wife is perusing his countenance. His dark eyes are half closed and sullen, and there is a cruelty about his compressed lips that is almost murderous. Muriel, reading him, sees something that warns her it will scarcely be wise to bring herself into prominence in his sight so long as she has Staines in her train, but a mad fit of wilfulness is upon her, and a longing to sound him—to compel him to answer her—to see if the fire so unmistakably smouldering within him will burst at her voice into a flame, drives her to reach and address him.

'It is so warm here it stifles me!' she says to Staines, who has been looking in a contrary direction to hers and has not seen Branksmere in the crowd in the doorway. 'Come into the hall.'

She moves slowly through the thronged room towards the place where her husband stands, but as she reaches it, she sees he has quitted his position, and either because of her coming, or for some other more ordinary reason, is now moving indolently away from her to the right, towards some disused rooms, not got up in festive array, that still, by means of the balcony outside, have access to the ball-room.

Possessed by her one idea, now grown obstinate, she follows him, with Staines always beside her, into a side room, half lit and void of decoration, that had been originally intended as an additional boudoir, but at the last moment had been discarded as superfluous. There is a good deal of useless twine and wire flung into the corners, and almost in the centre of the floor a heavy bar of iron lies, that had been thrown there, presumably, when the workmen had found no further use for it.

Lady Branksmere, not seeing well in the dim light, catches her foot awkwardly in it, and stumbles. She sways nervously, and puts out her arms as if with an involuntary demand for help; a little rounded 'Oh!' of alarm breaks from her lips.

With an exclamation, Staines springs forward and catches her. His fingers close warmly round her lovely naked arm; he has forgotten everything but her, even the dark shades in the lower part of the room. He is rudely awakened to the present by an arm that, coming between him and Lady Branksmere, hurls him backwards to where the wall checks and supports him.

When he recovers himself it is to find Branksmere staring at him with an unpleasantly savage longing on his dark, swarthy face. Staines goes down before that look, and stands, panting heavily, against the friendly wall.

Lady Branksmere has shaken herself free from her husband's grasp, and has moved back from him with a slow, recoiling motion. She has thrown up her small, queenly head, and is regarding him fixedly. Her lips are pale and parted, and her breath comes through them painfully; but her gaze is curiously steady, and in the large, deep eyes that burn into his there is scorn, contempt and hatred; but no fear!

Not a word is spoken. A strange, horrible silence seems to oppress all three. At length, when it has grown almost beyond endurance, Branksmere breaks it. He bursts into a harsh, grating laugh.

'I fear, Captain Staines, that my interference was rather a rough one,' he says lightly, the dangerous devil still lurking in his eyes. 'But when you remember my excess of zeal arose out of my anxiety for Lady Branksmere's safety, I feel sure you will pardon my seeming discourtesy. One or two old-world beliefs still cling to me. I was absurd enough to fancy,' with a mocking smile, 'that I, as her husband, was the one to rescue her in—a crisis such as this.'

Indifference to the 'lurking devil,' which is still disagreeably *en évidence*; Captain Staines bows an acknowledgment of this curiously worded apology.

'I had forgotten the strength of my arm. I did not hurt you, I trust?' says Branksmere with a laugh, slow and cruel, as he watches the other's discomfiture. Is there a faint threat in his words? A warning of what the future may contain for the man who shall dare to come between him and his peace? He removes his gaze slowly from Staines and bends it on his wife, who returns it haughtily.

'You have escaped this time,' he says slowly. 'But if you will permit me to advise, I should recommend you to avoid unfrequented places in the future. Beaten paths are best. And—one may trip once too often.'

It would be impossible to describe the rage in her eyes as he finishes this speech.

'Sound advice,' she returns, in a low, choking voice. 'May I hope, my lord, that you yourself will take it to heart?'

A pale smile widens her lips for an instant; a very ghost of a smile. Then, as if by magic, her whole humour changes, and she turns to Staines with the old calm listlessness full upon her.

'This way evidently leads no whither,' she says indifferently. 'Let us return to civilisation.'

She sweeps leisurely towards the door by which she had entered, and once again enters the world of light without. Slowly, with an unmoved front, she passes down the long, cool hall, dotted here and there with groups either standing or sitting who have gladly escaped from the heated atmosphere within, to breathe more freely in the larger space without; past statues gleaming from their artificial bowers of sparkling

greenery ; past Margery, pale, with downcast eyes ; past Lord Primrose in a shady nook proposing once again to Lady Anne, who once again is giving him an evasive answer, the memory of 'poor Arthur' being present with her to-night ; past all these and many more goes Lady Branksmere, with Staines always beside her, and always with head erect and a calm brow, though in her soul is raging a tumult of passionate wrath that increases rather than dies as the moments go by.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Now they interpret motions, looks, and eyes :
At every word a reputation dies.

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Mrs. AMYOT looks up as Lady Branksmere brushes past the cosy nook that contains her, and regards her curiously.

'She is as impassive as a sphinx,' she says, a little enviously.

'Scarcely, *très chère* ; she is safe to break out later on,' murmurs Mrs. Vyner hopefully, who has sunk upon the lounge beside her, whilst waiting for their respective partners to bring them the ices for which they pine. 'Take heart !'

'If that be so, she will find herself presently the central figure of an imbroglio that I for one should prefer steering clear of. There is something odd about Branksmere's eyes. Ever noticed it ?'

'Neither that nor anything else about him. Instinct long since warned me he doesn't admire me, and I never waste my time.'

'I am afraid your little story about Lady Branksmere and Staines, unlike the run of its order, has some foundation.'

'What are you afraid of ?'

'Well, I should be sorry, for one thing, if matters went too far. I like Branksmere, and I tolerate her, though I grant you she is at times a degree impossible.'

'If you said she is on rare occasions a degree possible, I might follow you. As it is—— I have often warned you, my good child, that those quiet ones are never to be trusted, and I expect we shall have an explosion at the castle by next autumn that will lift our feet, as Mrs. Daryl would say. But hush ! here comes the Colonel, and I know no one'—glancing

at the advancing veteran who calls her wife—'who so cordially detests scandal as that priceless fossil.'

'Except me,' supplements Mrs. Amyot, with a frank laugh, 'when it is directed against myself.'

'I never feel like that,' smiles Mrs. Vyner serenely; 'conscious virtue would prevent me. The knowledge that the scandal was undeserved (as naturally it would be) would, in my case, raise me above all such weak fancies.'

'Ah!' says Mrs. Amyot, who seems amused.

'If the Colonel means coming, I wish he'd do it, and get it over,' exclaims Mrs. Vyner presently, in a disgusted tone. 'He was steering for us with all sails set, and scolding in his eye, a moment ago, and now he has come to anchor by Lady Anne. How I wish she would keep him for ever! *There* is a present, now, I would make her without regret.'

'It has always been a matter of speculation to me why on earth you married him.'

'He has a few pence,' returns her friend mildly. 'And I always hope he won't die until he has come in for the Bellair title and diamonds, and made me "my lady." After that the dear old man may abscond as soon as he likes, for me. Besides, I don't think there was anyone else just then.'

'There was always Tom.'

'Tom!' with an accent of unqualified, if lazy, scorn. 'I wonder if Tom could tell you at this instant whether he has five pounds or five thousand in the world? Now what under heaven should I have done with Tom? He is all very well, I *gran* you, as this or as that, but as a husband!—no, thank you! For the rest,' with an unaffected yawn, 'I am positive, if you were to analyse it, one man is as good as another.'

'There is a noble broadness about your views that one would do well to imbibe,' says Mrs. Amyot admiringly, who seems, indeed, delighted with her. 'I own, myself, to a silly prejudice in favour of youth, but no doubt that is a weakness. Ah! here comes your warrior at last. And with what a lowering visage! He looks as if he were about to order out one of his native regiments for instant execution.'

'He is only going to order me home. Don't be alarmed. I shan't go,' says Mrs. Vyner smoothly. 'He always makes a point of removing me when he thinks I'm having a good time, but I've learned by this how to square him. I confess I have been doing pretty well to-night, and he has a perfect talent for knowing when I am enjoying myself.'

‘I wonder you are not a little afraid of him; there is something about his under jaw—that——’

‘No, I am not afraid. I have secured myself. You know that cousin of his, Elfrida West? I wormed a little secret of his out of her—a secret belonging to his salad days, and consequently to the last century—that will stand to me if he ever dares to twit me with any of my shortcomings.’

‘She betrayed him?’

‘She sold him for forty pounds. I paid her that down for it. She was hard up at the time. She always is hard up, that poor Elfrida! and her woman had given her to understand that she would wait no longer for her bill. So she gave away the Colonel.’

‘What a bore those dressmakers are! one would think one could have money for them the moment they choose to ask for it.’

‘I was immensely obliged to Elfrida’s woman, for all that. Out of simple gratitude I gave her quite a large order the week later. She arranged me, you see. Yes, *doesn’t* the old man look furious! Watch how he tries to make mincemeat of his moustache. What has he heard now, I wonder?’ There is not an atom of concern or consternation in her tone; only a suppressed amusement.

‘Perhaps he is tired,’ suggests Mrs. Amyot kindly. ‘Borne down by the burden and heat of the evening, he is naturally anxious to get home.’

‘He is unnaturally anxious, you mean, to spoil my sport. To see me happy is to see *him* regularly on the champ. He is, I assure you, the very dearest old thing!’ says the Colonel’s wife gaily.

‘I hope you don’t wrong him,’ persists Mrs. Amyot earnestly, who has an affection for Mrs. Vyner that, to tell the truth of the latter, is honestly returned. ‘He is old, you know; he may be sleepy.’

‘He is old enough, in all conscience. One might perhaps indeed say he is old enough to be once again young enough to be eager for an early couch; but that is not his ailment.’

Mrs. Amyot gives in.

‘Well, I dare say, though a very charming man, he is a little wearing at times,’ she says leniently.

‘He is about the most unmitigated nuisance I know,’ returns the charming man’s wife promptly, with a simplicity truly edifying.

He has come up to her by this time, and now she throws back her picturesque head against the satin cushion of her chair, and turns up to his scowling one a face that actually beams all over with an affectionate smile. Even the keenest observer could not detect a flaw in it.

He is a tall, soldierly-looking man, at least thirty-five years older than she is, with an imposing moustache, and an irritable, suspicious eye. He seems now just a trifle unimpressed by her amiability.

'What's the hour, eh? Not going to stay here all night, eh? eh?'

'It is dull, isn't it?' responds Mrs. Vyner, with a yawn that is weak with weariness. 'I had hoped, darling, seeing you so gay all night, that you had not felt it; but as for me, I am positively done to death.'

'Humph!' says the Colonel, glaring at her.

'Are you coming home now? These mixed assemblies are very trying, don't you think? The butcher and the baker and the candlestick maker, you know—or at least their equivalents—in the rear of our own set. Don't let me hurry you, Douglas, but I confess I should be glad to put a termination to this *dreadful* evening.'

'M—m—m?' says the Colonel, running up quite a full gamut of suspicious query. 'It didn't occur to me that you were dull to-night.'

'I hope I shall never so far forget myself as to *look ennuyée*,' smiles Mrs. Vyner sweetly; 'but to *you*,' with an upward glance full of the prettiest confidence, 'the truth surely may be confessed. I have endured agonies since I entered this house. Indeed, I should say plainly that I have been insufferably bored, only'—with an adorable smile—'I know that would vex you, because it would not be nice to the poor county. It might hurt it if it came to know. But really these mixed entertainments,' dolefully, 'are very trying; and *this* one,' with a disdainful *moue*, 'is even a trifle more higgledy-piggledy than its fellows. Oh yes; I have been dull. Very!'

She sighs admirably, and shrugs her shoulders with a little pout.

'The fact of its being mixed is a special reason why we should be careful to cast no slight upon it,' returns the Colonel severely, with a pompous updrawing of his starched figure. He has changed his tune, having fallen into the net prepared for

him. 'These—er—strange people have their sensibilities as well as we others. Selfishness, and—er—open disregard of the feeling of those not quite in our own class, are defects that should be *crushed*!' He gazes sternly at her. As if overwhelmed by this reproach, Mrs. Vyner subsides gracefully behind her fan, from the shelter of which barricade she casts a mirthful glance at Mrs. Amyot.

'You are always right,' she murmurs presently, in a small submissive voice. 'But I do so *want* to go home.'

'I see the Duchess has not yet gone. Perhaps, to avoid even the appearance of giving offence, we had better stay another hour.'

He gives himself an air of determination, and marches off with his most military stiffness.

'*Dear* old man!' breathes his wife tenderly, following his departing figure with a lingering glance replete with feeling—of a kind. 'How generous! how noble-minded! how self-sacrificing he is! See how willing he is to resign his own comfort and linger on here in a social martyrdom for an hour longer, now that he believes that I am—*not* enjoying myself!—Ah, Sir Robert, my ice at last? What a time you have been absent! I quite thought you had been making it.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

Who purposely cheats his friend would cheat his God.

THE heavy, hot silence that is lying over everything out of doors seems to have rushed inwards, and wrapped all the house in its languor. Every available curtain has been drawn to exclude the tyrant sun. The halls and galleries are dim with a soft twilight gloom. The drawing-rooms and boudoirs are suggestive of growing night, though it is still early in the afternoon. The huge bunches of lily of the valley are drooping and dying in their Chelsea bowls. The tall tree ferns are languishing. The dogs lie upon the marble pavements panting for air, their mournful eyes looking liquid reproach at Nature, their red tongues hanging helplessly from their jaws.

The stillness that reigns all round is great enough to be felt; no footsteps fall upon the tessellated floors, no gay

laughter rings through the deserted gardens. They have all started on their fourteen miles drive through the richly wooded country to the tennis match at Lady Blount's. All save Lady Anne, who has gone down to the village to see the Vicar's wife—a distant connection and a crony of hers—and Lady Branksmere and—Staines.

Even the poor old Primrose woman has gone forth, true to her colours. That she ought to have been in her bed repenting her last night's fatigue goes without saying; but, like the gallant old soul she is, she has made a splendid struggle in the cause of mammon, and has sallied forth to-day to court fashion once again. Rather than desert the past she has so bravely defended for over half a century, she has braved the terrors of the miles and the stony roads, and is now jogging along the sultry highways and bowling through the scented lanes as though age and she have nothing in common. Not that the miles she travels can seem long to her, as she is at this moment lost in slumber in a corner of the carriage, snoring frankly with her bonnet all askew, to the undisguised delight of Mrs. Amyot, who, with Halkett and Tommy Paulyn, have been told off to take care of her.

Over Branksmere the stillness remains unbroken, save for the discordant scream of the strutting peacocks upon the terraces without, and the distant, drowsy cooing of the cushat doves in the woods far down in the valley. At last there comes a rustle of soft garments in the dim hall, the click of a light footstep, and one of the big dogs rising lazily gives himself a mighty shake, and goes to meet his mistress. Almost at the same instant a side door is slowly opened, and Captain Staines emerges from the gloom beyond.

'Good-morning, or rather good-evening, now,' he says, in a carefully careless tone, taking her proffered hand, which feels warm and tremulous within his grasp. Under his idle air his nature is all alert, and he scans her features warily to take note of any confusion that may colour them. But she is as cold, as indifferent, as self-possessed as though last night's occurrence had never been. If he is disappointed in his search for knowledge, his face does not betray him.

'True,' returns she, as though the thought has been forced upon her. 'It is already noon.' Her low, tragic voice, soft and sad, seems in unison with the hour, the day, and the solemn silence and dimness of the place.

'Your headache is better?' asks he hopefully. 'I knew

the intolerable heat last night was bound to knock you up. The arrangements were far from perfect. They have made a prisoner of you all the morning.'

'As a rule neither heat nor cold affects me—in fact, nothing does, much,' replies she calmly, ignoring or not seeing the motive of his speech. 'But I confess my head was a trouble to me to-day.'

'I have been thinking that perhaps half an hour or so on the island—you know how fresh it always is there—together with the row across, would do you good,' says Staines, in an ordinarily friendly tone.

'There is scarcely time, is there?' She looks at him absently, as though it is a matter of indifference to her whether she goes there or anywhere else, as indeed it is. She glances up at the clock. 'It is now very nearly four. Those people' (smiling) 'will be coming home again, and will expect me to be here to give them their tea.'

'Tut! that will not be for hours,' retorts he gaily. 'Not until you have had time to be there and back again, over and over. Free your conscience on that score. I promise you shall be back here before they are.'

'That, of course: I wonder if I could get to the island and home again in two hours? Now that you have put it into my head I feel as if the lake is the one thing I desire. Oh for a breeze! And there might be a small one there.' She presses her hand wearily to her forehead.

'A foregone conclusion,' cries he gaily. 'Let us start at once, then, if your return at the time you say is imperative.'

Beneath his seeming *bonhomie* there is lying a strong eagerness. Time is moving away from them, and any moment now may bring Branksmere home to keep the appointment with Muriel, of which she is ignorant, and which Staines has pledged himself to prevent.

'Come, then,' she says languidly, moving towards the open hall door, being already prepared for an afternoon stroll, with the help of a huge hat with heavy waving plumes, and a pair of gloves that reach up to her elbows, and a big white umbrella that breathes defiance at old Sol.

The walk through the shady wood beneath the scented pines is rich with a sweet fragrance. The widening leaves are casting shadows on the mossy turf beneath, and the oppressive heat of the more open land is here subdued and

saddened. It is the fading away of spring, the dawning of summer, a season full of—

Sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie,

and where winds are hushed, and speech grows low, and where a languorous noontide seems at one with the happy laziness that fills our blood.

The way has seemed neither long nor wearying, though it has been travelled in almost comparative silence, and it appears a sort of surprise to Muriel when they at last come to its end, and emerge upon the borders of the lake, where in a picturesque hut sits a ferryman during the warm months to row the visitors at the castle to the exquisite little island now basking in the sunshine about half a mile from the shore.

Stepping into the boat, Muriel, with a vague sense of rest and pleasure full upon her—a rest that has been unknown to her for some time—draws off her glove and lets one white slender hand drag idly through the pleasant water. Great water-flags touch her now and then, and many other trailing weeds, wave-worn and drooping beneath the sun's hot glance. Gaudy flies of every hue dance lightly on the ripples, and farther out upon the very bosom of the lake the tremulous lilies sway indolently with each softest motion of the wind or water.

Leisurely the boatman plies his oar, and presently brings them to the tiny beach that belongs to the island. Still in her new dreamy mood, Muriel steps ashore and walks away from the boat and round the little curve of rock that leads to the upper plateau. She has almost forgotten the existence of Staines in this vague new-born peace of hers, and is altogether unaware that he has lingered behind her to say a word or two to the ferryman. Presently, however, as she hears him hurrying after her, she comes back to the present with a little start.

'You told the man to wait?' she asks anxiously. 'You know my stay here must be short.'

'I told him that,' reassuringly. 'I warned him you should be home by a certain hour, so I suppose it will be all right. Let us forget time for the moment,' gaily, 'and try to enjoy to the full this delicious afternoon.'

A little trembling wind has arisen, and is blowing right into their faces. It is so blessed a thing, coming as it does

after the intolerable heat of the morning, that Lady Branksmere, with a quick sigh of delight, sinking on the soft sward, throws off her hat and gives her burning forehead to its cooling caress.

Far away the calm ocean is glinting brightly. 'Above the soft sweep of the breathless bay' the silver gulls are flying, hovering, looking for their fishy prey. Inland rushes the noise of the mysterious waves as they beat their breasts against the stony rocks.

And still Muriel sits here dreamily; and still her companion sits beside her, never addressing her, never striving to break the curious silence in which she has enwrapped herself, content in the thought that she is willing he should be with her. A word here, an insinuation there, a careful hint, the useful tact that teaches him when to speak and when to be silent (as on the present occasion)—upon all these powerful means Staines depends to win his way with her in the end.

'A falling drop,' says Lucretius, 'at last will cave a stone,' and in so far Staines agrees with him. Perseverance, thorough and rigid, will win the day, long after more daring methods have failed. The yellow haze that hung over everything is now dying away. Evening is declaring itself. Muriel's thoughts, whether they be sweet or bitter, are certainly all-mastering as they still keep her chained to this island fastness, although the day is declining, and the first wild glory of the sun has departed. The flowers lift their heads as the great heat dies, and over the lake the swallows dart upon their homeward way.

Perhaps the strange sense of unreality that belongs to evening begins to oppress her now, because she shivers a little and lifts her head. Yes! her calm hour has come to an end. She must rise up and go back to her unrest. Is anything lasting? Is it the cruel law that all good things must have a speedy end? And she had been happy here! The skimming swallows catch her eye as they flit—now so low down upon the water that almost their breasts seem to touch it, now so far above her in the pale blue of the air that their twitterings cease to sound in her ears. Their very gaiety disheartens her. They are free from care, whilst she——

Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow,

How can thine heart be full of the spring?

A thousand summers are over and dead.

What hast thou found in the spring to follow?
What hast thou found in thine heart to sing?
What wilt thou do when the summer is shed?

Swallow, my sister, O singing swallow,
I know not how thou hast heart to sing.

She sighs wearily, and rises to her feet.

‘Come, let us return,’ she says in a low tone. ‘It is already past the hour.’

He rises too, in obedience to her commands; and she going first, and he following, they arrive again at the small beach. It is deserted; neither boat nor ferryman is to be seen.

‘How is this?’ asks she coldly, looking round at him.

‘It is very extraordinary—it is inconceivable,’ says Staines, gazing north, south, east, and west, with a large amazement in his eyes. ‘I can’t imagine how the fellow could have misunderstood me, and yet——’

‘You told him to wait?’

‘No. But I very fully explained to him that you wished to be home at a certain hour. I am awfully sorry if any mistake of mine has caused——’

She stops him with an impatient gesture.

‘That is of no consequence at all,’ she says contemptuously. ‘The thing now to be considered is what is best to be done.’

‘He cannot be much longer away,’ begins Staines eagerly, but again she refuses to listen. She has taken out her watch, and is examining it with a frown of dismay.

‘Half-past five already,’ she exclaims in a low tone, addressing herself, as though ignorant or careless of his presence. Indeed, she turns determinedly away from him, and begins to pace up and down the confined gravelled space with angry uncertain steps. She is disturbed, uneasy, and indignant with the man who, however undesignedly, has led her into a position that *may* be questionable, and will *certainly* be termed imprudent if discovered. Any suspicion of Staines having purposely misled the ferryman as to the real hour she had named for her return is far from her, but in the first flush of her annoyance she cannot altogether pardon him for having been its cause. It is hard to forgive the clumsy carelessness that will in all probability make her the cynosure of every eye, when she returns at an over-late hour to her wondering guests.

Again she looks at her watch. It is now close on six o'clock, and still no sign of the ferryman. Good Heavens, if he were to forget to come at all! If some accident should have happened to him! As this horrible thought suggests itself the blood surges up wildly into her face, only to leave it again whiter than before. What will they all say? What will be thought of her by Mrs. Vyner, with her sneering smile? by Mrs. Amyot, with her amused one? What will be thought by— Her teeth close savagely upon her under lip, and she turns suddenly upon Staines with a fierce vehemence, scorn and angry misery within her eyes.

'Do *something*!' she cries, bringing her foot down impatiently upon the ground.

'What can I do?' desperately. 'All that is left me is to tell you how bitterly I regret—'

'All the regret of which you could be capable would not get me home a minute sooner,' declares she impetuously. 'Why don't you *act*? Why do you stand there with that incapable look upon your face? Surely'—with a feverish fire in her eyes—'something can be done. There must be a way of attracting the attention of some one on the opposite shore. Is there no signal you can make to the man? He may be there, he may hear you. The day—oh no,' with miserable correction, 'the *evening* is so still, that any sound will carry that short distance. Try something—anything.'

'There is no need, the man is coming,' returns he sullenly, pointing across the lake to where a boat can be seen pushing slowly through the water-weeds that throng the bank. Presently it is out in the more open water, and as the man is rowing vigorously, in about ten minutes or so he reaches them. Staines goes up to him.

'What do you mean by being an hour late?' he demands in a loud, angry key. He has gained his object, her interview with Branksmere is now an impossibility; and though she will probably reach home before the others, this long, solitary ramble with him will undoubtedly damage her in the eyes of her husband.

'I'm not late, sir.' The man is regarding him with surprise in tone and glance. 'It is not yet six o'clock.'

'I desired you to be back here at five sharp,' declares Staines in a still more distinct and angry voice.

'Six, sir, begging your pardon,' says the man firmly.

‘Five, I told you! It is unpardonable her ladyship should be subjected to such neglect.’

‘I am very sorry, my lady,’ mutters the man, turning to Muriel with a respectful air, cap in hand; ‘but I quite thought as how the gentleman had said six.’ As he speaks he glances at Staines with a curious, furtive air. There is a persistency about his manner that occurs to Muriel long afterwards.

‘You shouldn’t think,’ says Staines, beginning to bluster a little, but Lady Branksmere checks him.

‘Enough has been said,’ she decides quietly. ‘It was a mistake, it appears. Let it rest.’ She sweeps past him to the boat. ‘The thing is to get home now with as little more delay as possible.’

The row across the lake is a silent one, and Muriel springs upon the land with a sigh of relief. Staines, pressing half a sovereign into the ferryman’s hand, accompanies her swiftly down the narrow woodland path. The ferryman, gazing after him, scratches his head reflectively.

‘What’s that for now, I wonder?’ he ponders to himself, staring at the little gold coin upon his brown palm. ‘He don’t look like a gent as would be free with his tin. To keep silence, is it? Eh! But I knew ’twere six ’e said.’

With hasty footsteps Muriel hurries home. Already the god of day has sunk behind the hills in a red glory, and twilight is coming up from the sea. It is that most delicious hour of all the day, ‘this hour dividing light from dark,’ but for Muriel it holds no charms. One ray of comfort alone sustains her; she remembers that Branksmere seldom returns from town until the seven o’clock train, and surely she will be safe in her own room before that. As for the others, she may escape them.

She may, and does for five minutes or so, but Branksmere is standing in one of the open windows as she and Staines come down the avenue. Madame von Thirsk is sitting in a low wicker chair near him.

‘Ah!’ she cries, with an impulsive air of relief, ‘here is Lady Branksmere at last! We all know,’ leniently, ‘how difficult it is to drag oneself away from—the warmth of an evening such as this; but I am glad,’ with a kindly intonation, ‘that she has managed to get home before the arrival of the others. Mrs. Vyner’s tongue is sharply pointed.’

She sighs, as if sorry for Mrs. Vyner’s tongue, and rising, moves towards the door. Branksmere makes her no reply.

His eyes have met Muriel's, and are resting on them. Though some distance separates them, each can see that the other's face has grown strangely pale.

After a moment or so Branksmere drops his glance and leaves the window.

'That woman again!' mutters Muriel between her teeth. Her voice is very low, but Staines hears her.

'I have already warned you,' he reminds her, bending towards her. 'It will be insult upon insult heaped!' And then, as she moves away from him through the dark old hall, he follows her to say a last impressive word. 'Remember! *there is always a remedy!*' he whispers in a low tone.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Consider that the invisible thing called a good name is made up of the breath of the numbers that speak well of you.

SHE has barely time to go to her room and put herself into the hands of her woman before the arrival of her guests, returning from Lady Blount's tennis match, makes itself felt in the house by the sounds of gay laughter and the click-clack of high-heeled shoes running up the stairs. Mrs. Amyot knocks at the door in passing to ask if her headache is better, and with a vile sense of hypocrisy full upon her she answers, 'Yes, a little,' though the headache certainly had been there in the morning, and no faintest untruth had been uttered about it.

She is feeling tired, worn out in soul and body, and it is with a sense of physical comfort that she sheds her walking attire and lets Bridgman clothe her in the looser, easier tea-gown, of white terry velvet, that sits so charmingly upon her lissome figure, and is undesecrated by faintest spot of colour. As the maid is putting a last finishing touch to her, Muriel asks a question, that is yet hardly one.

'Lord Branksmere has returned?' she says.

'Oh, yes, my lady. He returned by the four o'clock train. He inquired for your ladyship, but I told him you had gone for a walk with Captain Staines, as your head was bad.'

'And?'

'He was put out, my lady, as was natural; very much put

out. Afterwards, he had a late luncheon with Madame von Thirsk, and after that went up to visit her ladyship, the Dowager.'

A strange look comes into Muriel's eyes.

'I am afraid he had but a dull afternoon,' she says lightly, in a perfectly changed tone. 'Did her ladyship keep him long?'

'No, my lady. But he was not so altogether dull as you fear. Madame kept him company in the library for some time. But he did seem real disappointed—almost vexed one might say—when he did not find your ladyship on his coming back from town. He is in the picture gallery now with Madame. Would your ladyship wish to——'

No! Her ladyship would not wish to see him!

Bridgman being dismissed presently, Lady Branksmere rises from the chair and her enforced calm, and begins to pace feverishly up and down the room. So he had returned, then, at four! he who had never yet been known to get back from town until about half an hour before dinner! What had hastened his movements to-day—to-day when he had believed her safe at Lady Blount's with all her guests? Was it an arrangement between him and Madame? Had she decided upon staying at home to receive him? All his air of disappointment at not finding her, his wife, must have been acted for Bridgman's benefit, for the saving of his own lost honour. Good Heavens! what insults are showered daily on her head! Was ever woman so hemmed in by them? To stoop to deceive her waiting-maid, to pretend surprise at her mistress's absence, knowing well in his heart all the while that the mistress was miles away! Oh, the shame! the duplicity of it! She clenches her hands, and her lips grow white with passionate resentment and that sense of injury that only the woman betrayed can feel.

What was it Staines had said at that last moment at the foot of the stairs? 'A remedy!' 'There is always a remedy; always.' She was to remember that. So she does. So she will. Ha! see that they do not drive her too far. More than one can play at this damning game that he—her husband—(oh! the ignominy of it!) has chosen as his pastime.

She brings her teeth down sharply on her under lip, and stands as one transfixed, horrified yet fascinated by the terrible possibility she has permitted to dawn upon her. Then

suddenly she leans back against the table behind her and bursts into a low, wild laugh that is more forlorn than tears; sadder than despair. Checking it abruptly she takes up her handkerchief, and with the last remnant of that reckless mirth still alight within her gleaming eyes, goes to the south gallery to meet her guests.

Mrs. Amyot's voice reaches her as she steps from behind a large screen.

'We are disgracefully late,' that pretty butterfly is saying to Lord Branksmere. 'We richly deserve the scolding that I hope Lady Branksmere will not give us. And, after all, I don't know why we stayed. It was stupid to suffocation, and Lady Blount, as we all know, is—— Well, wretchedly so, *isn't* she now? You agree with me?'

'Entirely,' says Branksmere.

'So you see Lady Branksmere had no loss. But I am afraid she must have found it very lonely here all by herself.'

'Terribly lonely—all by herself,' returns Branksmere with a grim smile, looking straight at his wife as she comes slowly towards them over the polished floor, her long white dress trailing behind her.

'Oh, no, I was not lonely,' says she, in a sweet, clear voice. 'I went for a row on the lake with Captain Staines, and the fresh breeze there did my head all the good in the world.' There is a touch of defiance in the glance she directs at her husband.

'Ah, there is no doctor like a—retired military man,' lisps Mrs. Vyner, her little hesitation so slight as to be noticed by only one or two.

'I hope, my dear Muriel, you took the herb-water I prescribed for you this morning,' pipes old Lady Primrose anxiously. 'I told your woman to be sure and make you take it. It is infallible. I always give it to Primrose in town when his head feels queer, and he says it works wonders.'

'So it does—on the heads of the passers-by,' mutters Primrose, *sotto voce*, 'because I always chuck it out of the window.'

'What a naughty little flower you are!' whispers Mrs. Amyot, with a smile and glance that brings back Halkett to her side without a second's delay. He had been a little inclined to wander afield, but this touch of coquetry, directed at another, restores him to his proper level at once. He

forsakes Margery, who, accompanied by Bellew and Peter, has come over more to walk off a restless mood than for anything else, and who in truth in her present mood is not desirous of his company.

'I'm tired,' says Halkett, with a sigh, sinking down beside Mrs. Amyot, who pulls to herself with a very gentle but meaning action the soft, loose folds of her tea-gown. The heavy black Spanish laces cling to her obediently, as if to endorse the decision of their mistress to draw back from him now, at once, and for ever. But if this action of hers has meaning, Halkett declines to see it. 'I have plenty of room, thanks,' he murmurs sweetly; 'don't crush your pretty gown. But country life is very vigorous, is it not? A ball last night—fourteen miles of a drive to-day, with unspeakable stupidity at the end of it. It is just the trifle too much, eh?'

'So you seem to think.'

'Don't *you*? Bless me,' says Mr. Halkett, leaning forward to examine her more critically, 'now I come to look at you you don't seem to have a vestige of fatigue about you. Not a hair turned. How I envy you your staying powers! How I wish,' plaintively, 'I were as strong as you are.'

At another time Mrs. Amyot might have laughed here; now she looks politely vague.

'I wish it, too,' she says, with a solidity that sits funnily upon her in spite of her stern determination to have nothing to do with badinage of any sort. 'I could wish nobody anything better than health like mine. Ah!' Her tone suddenly changes to one of warmest regard. 'Is that you, then, my Tinytuff! my sweetheart!' holding out her arms to a fluffy little white Maltese terrier, who is rolling towards her with tongue *en évidence*. 'Come here, then, to its mistress, my love, my mouse, my cat.'

She lifts the pretty thing on to her laces, and buries her face in its silky hair.

'Odd, now!' says Halkett, with a meditative air; 'do you know, until this very instant, I was always of opinion that that priceless animal was a dog. Fact, I assure you! Just shows how fancy will run away with one at times.'

'A passing fancy, yes,' returns she, with a small, swift glance at him from under her drooping lashes.

'It wasn't an evanescent affair by any means,' declares Halkett; 'don't get yourself to imagine it so. On that score

no excuse can be laid to my folly. It was a *bonâ-fide* belief. I would have sworn it was a dog.'

At this moment a huge greyhound, that up to this has lain *perdu*, approaching Mrs. Amyot, makes a snap at the dainty favourite lying upon her lap, seizes it bodily, and with a savage shake drops it on to the floor. A piercing shriek bursts from the terrified Maltese, as it breaks loose from its assailant and runs to hide itself amongst the lace skirts of its mistress. The latter, who has turned pale with fear, lifts it hurriedly and clasps it to her bosom. Meantime Halkett has driven away the greyhound, who disappears somewhere into the recesses of the curtained windows.

'What a savage beast,' breathes Mrs. Amyot faintly. 'How he terrified me, and my poor little lambkin here.' She caresses with tenderest looks the still trembling terrier crouching in her arms.

'Don't!' entreats Halkett feebly. 'If you call it by any other name, however sweet, I shall be undone. As it is my brain is on fire. If a cat, how can it be a mouse? if a mouse how can it be a lamb? if a lamb, how a cat? The question goes round and round, and there is no answer to be found for it anywhere.'

'What a cruel, premeditated attack. Did you watch it?' demands she, gazing at him with liquid eyes. 'The treacherous brute! To make such a wanton war on my poor little pet.'

'It's my opinion that he hasn't done with him yet,' says Halkett mysteriously. 'There was a look in his eyes as I drove him off—a greedy look—that spoke of a banquet assured on the morrow. Take my word for it, he has made up his mind to your little incongruity! He's as good as gone already. I shouldn't put off the evil hour if I were you: prolonged torture is wearing: I'd pull down all the blinds without an instant's delay; put the household into state mourning, and get up a pathetic funeral.'

'I am so glad you are amused,' says Mrs. Amyot, with a withering glance.

'I have always thought there was something wrong with my countenance. Now I know it.' Mr. Halkett looks melancholy. 'When I am literally sunk in a very slough of despond I am told I am in wild spirits. Do you really believe I should find amusement in the slaughter of your little innocent? Your little *rara avis*? No! There is nothing invidious in that appellation. No hidden sarcasm. I see no earthly

reason why that remarkable animal of yours, if he can be a cat, a mouse, and a lamb all in one, shouldn't be a bird, too !'

'You are without feeling,' says Mrs. Amyot resentfully. 'At least as far as *I* am concerned. For me you reserve your nastiest moods. Why? I wonder. What is it that I have done to you?'

'Ah! what indeed,' returns Halkett, leaning towards her, and under cover of the small dog's hair stroking with tender touch her little fair hand. 'I leave your conscience to answer that.'

'You told me only last night I had none,' murmurs she, colouring delicately.

'I say many things,' remorsefully glancing up at her, 'that I don't mean. There is, perhaps, only one thing I ever say to you that is entirely true; *entirely*.'

'And that?' The eyes that are gazing into his have grown suddenly full of tears, and her breath comes with a soft eagerness from her parted lips.

'Pah! If I told you again, you would but laugh at me as you did that first time,' exclaims he with a touch of bitterness, and rising abruptly he moves away from her.

Lady Primrose has now got hold of Muriel.

'I do trust, my dear, you did not stay long on that lake,' she is saying with ponderous anxiety. 'Nothing so unwholesome as a water mist, and there was sure to be one uprising on such a day as this.' She is so deaf, poor old soul, that she always talks at the top of her lungs, being, perhaps, under the impression that her neighbours are similarly afflicted, so that all she says is given to the gallery in general.

'There was no mist, I think. I felt no unpleasantness,' replies Lady Branksmere calmly. Only Margery, who is watching her with sad eyes, notices the convulsive twitching of the white hand hidden in the folds of her gown.

'Of course, Branksmere, being with you, would see to that,' croons on the old lady, whose intellect having grasped the fact that Branksmere was not at Lady Blount's can no further go beyond imagining that if not there he *must* have been with his wife. 'Nothing so good as a husband, my dear,' with a benevolent smile, 'when all is told.'

Deadly silence, broken only by a murmur from Mrs. Vyner, which is understood by all but Lady Primrose.

'You will bear me out,' she is whispering mildly to Curzon

Bellew, 'that I always said the dear old creature was in her dotage. Doesn't that speech confirm it?'

'But I think she looks tired, Branksmere—she looks pale,' calls out the mistaken old lady across the room. 'I doubt you kept her on that lake too long.'

'I don't think so,' says Branksmere. He lifts his head and gives way to a curious little laugh. 'That lake possesses charms for her of which we know nothing. She would have pined all day but for the benefit she derived from its air.' He says all this with the most natural manner possible, but Muriel writhes and winces inwardly beneath each sharp cut. How dare *he* take *her* to task!

'That may be,' goes on Lady Primrose dubiously. 'But I suffered so much from headaches myself at one time that I feel the greatest sympathy, my love,' laying her trembling old hand on Muriel's cold, irresponsive one, 'for those who now have to endure them. I remember well how Primrose—my husband, my dear—used to have to bathe my brows by the hour together with lavender water. It was the only thing that did me good, and his touch was gentle as a girl's. It was just before my son was born,' nodding across to where the last Primrose of *her* life, at least, stands 'blooming alone.' 'Ah! His father was indeed one in a thousand. I never could bear him out of my sight in those days!'

'Your father must have been the most fascinating man of his day,' says Mrs. Vyner, who can be unpardonably impertinent in her little babyish way.

'Now that I come to think of it, in spite of his many virtues—and they were many—my father, I fear, would be regarded by you as a very ordinary individual,' replies Primrose simply. 'But after all, you know, there *are* women who not only love but respect their husbands.'

'Specially when they are dead,' smiles Mrs. Vyner agreeably, who is not to be subdued by any man born.

'Do you ever get Branksmere to try lavender water with *your* head, my love?' asks Lady Primrose of Muriel with gentle investigation.

'No.' Muriel, who has grown even paler, shakes her head. 'I do not have so many headaches as you suppose, and when one comes to me I find my maid can do for me everything I require.'

'Ah! a maid is not a husband,' puts in Lady Primrose strongly.

Everyone seems struck with this.

“Age makes the sage,” quotes Halkett gravely, in a low tone. ‘Let us be grateful for small mercies, in that the old lady has at last stumbled upon an incontrovertible fact. Any-one,’ looking round him, ‘prepared to dispute the truth of her remark? Could a maid be a husband?’

No one, it need hardly be said, takes any notice of him.

‘I always think one’s own woman understands one so much better than anyone else,’ says Mrs. Amyot good-naturedly, seeing the set expression of Muriel’s mouth, and the ill-suppressed frown upon her brow.

‘Well, at all events, she is looking too white to please me,’ declares Lady Primrose with some faint insistence. ‘I don’t believe in that lake, I don’t indeed. Don’t take her there again, Branksmere, if an old woman’s advice is worth following.’

‘I won’t,’ returns Branksmere, and again he laughs unpleasantly. A suspicion that he is seeking to shield her from Lady Primrose’s censure waking within Muriel’s breast, drives her to an open declaration of the realities of the question at issue.

‘Branksmere was not with me at the lake to-day,’ she says, coldly but distinctly. ‘He went to town by the early train this morning.’

‘Eh, my dear? I quite understood him to say—— What was it you said, Branksmere? And if he was not with you, my dear, who was—eh? eh?’

‘Oh! Lady Primrose! Do you know I quite forgot to tell you until this moment—but——’ breaks in Margery’s gay, sweet voice—‘I have discovered that new knitting stitch that so puzzled us last week. Willie knew all about it. It is the prettiest thing: see,’ dropping on her knees before her and taking up the eternal work-basket that ever accompanies the old Countess—‘let me show it to you now while it is fresh upon my mind. One. One, two—one, two, three—a turn—you quite see? and then back again. It has the happiest result.’

It has indeed! Lady Primrose growing enthusiastic over the new stitch, Muriel makes her escape to a distant tea-table, where comparative calm is at least obtained, until the dinner bell rings, and she is enabled to make her escape to her own room.

Dinner is a rather languid affair, most of the guests being too tired to even make a pretence at conversation, and by ten

o'clock all have melted away to their several apartments. Muriel, with a long sigh of heartfelt relief, flings herself into a lounging chair in the pretty satin-lined nest, half boudoir, half dressing-room, that opens out of her bedroom ; and gives herself up to the luxury of being entirely alone, without fear of interruption. Now at last she can think ; can review her day ; can give herself up completely to the various emotions that are swaying her. Leaning back in her chair in her black evening gown she presses her fingers against her aching lids and seeks to concentrate her thoughts.

A slight noise startles her. Hastily lowering her hands from her face she looks up. Lord Branksmere is standing on the hearthrug a few paces from her, gazing at her intently !

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Harsh springs, and fountains bitterer than the sea.

.

HIS face is white and stern, a sullen frown has gathered on his forehead ; beneath his bent brows his eyes look out on her, filled with suppressed fire.

'This is an unwarrantable intrusion,' says Lady Branksmere, rising slowly to her feet, and standing now with her hand resting upon the back of her chair. She glances swiftly at the door, as if to assure herself that it is indeed locked, as when she herself five minutes ago had turned the key in it. He must have come, then, through the bedroom.

'Not more so than usual,' coldly. 'My presence—*anywhere*—is an intrusion now, if you happen to be there.'

'What has brought you ?' asks she haughtily, gazing at him with ill-concealed dislike.

'I have come to demand an explanation,' returns he deliberately, crossing the room to close the door by which he had entered. His very action has such determination in it that it startles her.

'Explain ! What should I have to explain ?' replies she proudly. She lifts her eyes to his as though to court his scrutiny—experience having taught her perhaps that this is the safest way to escape from it—but to-night her plan, if it is one, fails ; his eyes refuse to go down before hers, he takes even a step that brings him nearer to her.

'You will be kind enough to tell me,' he says slowly, 'what it is you mean by your friendship with Captain Staines.'

'Take care,' cries she suddenly; 'this is rather a dangerous tone for you to take with me, is it not? Consider, Branksmere! before you rouse me to recrimination. Have I no fault to find, think you? Have I no wrongs?'

'Let us come to that later on, if you will,' returns he in an unmoved tone. 'At present confine yourself to the question in hand. I wish to know how matters stand between you and—your guest.'

'Yours—rather.'

'True. I had forgotten his double dishonour there.'

'Honour is a word that seems to trip lightly from your tongue,' sneers she with ineffable contempt. 'Is it, then, a thing so dear to you?'

'So much of it as lies in your keeping I shall at least look after,' retorts he steadily.

Her large eyes flash. She flings the feather fan she has up to this been almost unconsciously holding far from her towards a distant lounge. She misses her aim, however, and it comes with a crash to the ground. Branksmere, with a coolness that literally grates upon her excited nerves, goes slowly up to it, lifts it and places it noiselessly upon the table near.

'That you have come here with the express purpose of insulting me,' exclaims she bitterly, 'is plain enough. Yet I hardly think there was need for it. Every day, every hour I spend beneath your roof is filled with such affronts as only the meanest of your sex would dare offer to any woman.'

'I must again beg of you to keep to the matter under discussion. As I have already said, I can listen to your side of the affair later on.'

'What is it you want with me?' asks she with sudden vehemence. 'Be quick! Let me hear it. I am tired, worn out. I would be alone.' She beats her foot impatiently against the floor.

'If you are tired, sit down.' He pushes a low chair towards her. His tone is still studiously calm. 'I shall not leave this room to-night until I have had an answer from you, and come to some understanding.'

'I am placed at the bar, it appears,' murmurs she with a curious smile. 'State your case, then. Let me know of what I am accused. What fancied wrongs are yours?'

'I seldom have fancies,' coldly. 'I have refrained from speech until you yourself have rendered silence no longer possible. When your name is made public property, when it is in the mouths of all, I feel——'

'Be silent!' interrupts she impetuously, 'I want none of your comments. Tell me only of what it is you accuse me.'

'Of your intimacy with your former lover,' cries he, with the first touch of violent anger he has shown. His nostrils dilate, his breath comes heavily through his white lips. 'Last night you made yourself conspicuous with him before the entire county; to-day, under the pretext of a headache, you absented yourself from your guests, refused to accompany them to Lady Blount's, that you might have an uninterrupted afternoon with him.'

'It is false,' returns she vehemently; 'my head did ache. I stayed away from Lady Blount's, yet it was by the merest chance that I went on the lake with Captain Staines.'

'Pshaw!' exclaims he scornfully.

'Listen to me or not, as you will,' haughtily. 'I had no intention of going on the lake until long after they had all gone to that tennis match.'

'And was it the merest chance, too, that kept you on the island with that—fellow—for three long hours—*short* hours, rather?' with a pale smile.

'Did she tell you all that?' asks Lady Branksmere slowly. A strange little laugh breaks from her. 'She is indeed invaluable. What more did your spy impart to you? Perhaps she told you, too (though no doubt she omitted that part of the story), how it was I spent so long upon the island? However, that hardly matters. That would not be an interesting part to either her or you. Let me rest as vile as you both would fain make me out.'

'Can you deny that you deliberately refused to comply with my request for an interview this afternoon?'

'I know nothing of any interview. But if I am to be unjustly condemned for so many things one more is of little consequence.' Then all at once she turns upon him, and her wrath breaks out. 'How dare you speak to me,' she cries, 'you who turned back from town by an early train to spend your time with Madame von Thirsk, believing me to be safely out of your way at Lady Blount's? Oh, it is *wise* of you to turn the tables upon me lest I be the first to bring an accusation. But you need not have sunk so low; I should not have

questioned you. Look here,' cries she, throwing out her arms, with a gesture of weariness, 'I suppose it is that I no longer *care*. I give in. Do what you will without fear of censure from me. I feel deadened, emotionless. You have killed within me all feeling, all sensibility.'

'To follow your rhapsodies is beyond me,' says Branksmere with a shrug. 'But I regret that you should consider it necessary to disclaim all knowledge of my having asked of you that interview.'

'When I say I know nothing of it I speak only the truth.'

He looks at her searchingly, but her eyes meet his boldly.

'You mean to deny that you were unaware why I left town to-day by so early a train?'

'No,' contemptuously. 'On the contrary, I gave you fully to understand that I am quite aware of your reason for having done so.'

'Attend to me,' exclaims he sternly. 'Your flippancy will not serve you here. That you got the flowers I sent you last night I know, although you cast them aside that you might wear others worthier in your eyes.'

'There, too, you are mistaken,' she is beginning hurriedly, but she checks herself. She is tired of this useless explaining. Why press upon him a fact he is so determined not to believe. 'Certainly I received your flowers,' she finishes coldly.

'And my note in them?'

'There was no note; no message of any sort.' He regards her for a moment very fixedly, and then his lips curl in a slow, disdainful sneer. By a supreme effort she controls her temper and points to a distant table.

'There are the flowers you sent; go search them for this supposititious note of yours.' She had expected him to take no notice of this command, but to her surprise he turns and walks doggedly towards the table indicated, lifts the bouquet from the bowl in which the maid had placed it, and leisurely proceeds to examine it. 'What a waste of time to hope so to impress me,' she mutters to herself, watching him with a supercilious smile. A smile that fades, however, and gives place to angry astonishment as he pulls from the centre of the flowers a note carefully folded and holds it to her.

'You see I did write,' he says tranquilly, no touch of triumph in his tone. Mechanically she takes the paper from him, but makes no attempt to open it. She has grown extremely pale, and her hands are trembling.

'I never knew it was there,' she declares at last, like one dazed. He bows profoundly. Is there a touch of mockery in his salutation? 'I *swear* I never knew it,' repeats she eagerly, taking a step towards him.

'I do not ask for excuse or apology. Pray spare yourself and me,' returns he icily. She draws even nearer to him, her large stormy eyes fixed on his. She has thrown up her head, and with an action suggestive of unrestrainable passion has crumpled the note she holds in her clenched hand.

'You believe me?' she demands, in a low, choked voice.

'No!' replies he, with a terseness that is almost brutal.

There is a long pause, during which they stand staring at each other, hatred and defiance in their gaze. Then——

'Coward!' hisses she through her trembling lips.

'Nay, it is you who are the coward,' retaliates he calmly.

'It is through *fear* that you have thus lied to me.'

'Do you think that I am afraid of you?' cries she suddenly, with vehement scorn. 'You must be *mad* to talk to me like this! Where are you seeking to drive me? What is to be the end of all this, think you? *Afraid!* And of *you!* I tell you I defy you—to your face I defy you!'

The night is dark and chill, the wind has risen. A fire has been lighted in the grate, and the red glow from it lights up her shimmering gown, and quivers like a flame around her shapely head and statuesque figure, now strained to its full height. Her face is like marble, out of which her eyes gleam dark and fierce. The intensity of her passion only lends another charm to her exceeding beauty.

'There is no occasion to tell me that; you have done so openly ever since our luckless marriage,' says Branksmere bitterly. 'I owe you many things.'

'For the second time I warn you to beware,' exclaims she, losing all control. 'Are your actions, then, so altogether pure that you can afford to take me to task? You—*you*—who keep that shameless woman under the same roof with your wife!'

'Do you know what you are saying?' demands Branksmere fiercely, grasping her arm. 'Prove your words.'

'Oh! that I could,' breathes she wildly. 'That I could prove *anything* that would set me free from you.'

'Free to give yourself to another!' He lets her go abruptly, pushing her roughly away, and a sharp jarring laugh breaks from him. 'Pah! you play too open a game.'

I fear it is not in your power to furnish yourself with those proofs you so eagerly desire.'

'You mean——?' Her voice is curiously low and calm.

'That you would welcome any dishonour that would fling you into the arms of—*your lover*!'

It is said! Nothing can recall it! There is a moment's awful silence, and then Branksmere falls quickly back from her, a dark red stain across his cheek where her palm had struck him. It is all done and over in a moment, but for a full minute he scarcely recovers himself. Then it is to find the room empty. For in the tumult of her rage Lady Branksmere had caught up a shawl and hurried from the room—the house!

CHAPTER XXXV.

I shall remember while the light lives yet,
And in the night-time I shall not forget.

.

THE stars are hidden by the dense bank of clouds that makes dull the heavens, but a pale watery moon sheds here and there a vague pathway through the earth that helps her to find the woodland path that leads from the castle to her old home. Swiftly, mechanically, she moves towards it, conscious of little but that she is leaving behind her misery too great to be borne.

Her brain is still so disturbed, her thoughts so wild, that she can hardly concentrate them upon any one feeling; yet through all the confusion a sense of self-horror pervades her being. She is ashamed! that is the principal pain—ashamed down to the very innermost depths of her. She had raised her hand against him; she, Muriel! A touch of loathing, of cruel self-contempt, cuts into her already seared and bruised heart. She is smitten with remorse, stricken to the earth—not for him, but for her own pride, for the dignity that had once enveloped her.

Yet she sheds no tears. Why should she? What good would they do? Were she to weep her miserable eyes blind, would she gain by it? Would the Fates be at last kind? Would her grief propitiate them? Would they turn because of it, and succour her?

With blind haste she hurries along the little beaten track

beneath the shadowy leaves until a sudden turn in it brings her face to face with the walls of her old home, gleaming grey in the growing moonlight—the only home, she tells herself with sobbing breath, that she will ever know. Some instinct draws her feet to the quaint iron-bound door of the armoury, and laying her hand upon it, as one might who is sure of entrance even at this late hour, presses it from her to find her instinct true. The door yields, and she moves quickly onwards into the irregular vaulted passage beyond.

It is unlighted, but a stray beam flinging itself through the stained window at the lower end gives her a lead, and shows her the stone steps that bring her finally to the entrance hall above. The house is wrapped in silence, though at the farthest end of the hall one lamp is still burning in vague, dull fashion. An intense longing to gain Margery's chamber unseen, unheard, drives her to the staircase, but on her way the sound of soft laughter that seems to issue from a room upon her right checks her progress. Turning aside without thought, she opens the door of this room, and enters it so softly that her coming is unheard.

Here the lamps are lighted brilliantly ; the heavy silken curtains are closely drawn ; a small but eminently cosy little fire is coaxing an equally small kettle to sing with all its might. There is a tiny tea equipage upon a gipsy table, and upon another table near it a fowl delicately roasted, a tempting pâté—a Dresden bowl full of strawberries, and a long-necked bottle. Before the fire, in pretty, loose white robes, sit Mrs. Daryl and Margery ; at the side, Angelica, in a costume that might suggest to the intelligent onlooker that she had been summoned from her bed at a moment's notice. There is, indeed, an air of refined Bohemianism about the trio, and a subdued desire to prove to themselves and each other that servants are a snare and a swindle, and that everyone could get on ever so much better without them.

'I don't believe a kettle, a *small* kettle, could take so long to boil,' Mrs. Daryl is saying anxiously, leaning over the fire. 'When it makes that little fussy noise it's boiling, eh ?'

'I'm certain of it,' agrees Margery gladly. 'Let us make the tea.'

'It isn't *thinking* of boiling,' declares Angelica. 'I've boiled hundreds of kettles, and I know all about it. First it must sing, then the steam must pour out of its nose, and then it is all over, and—you take it up.'

She is looking at Margery as she speaks, and at this identical moment the kettle gives way to the ebullition of which she has been speaking. Puff, puff, goes the steam all over the place.

'If you mean *me*,' cries Margery pushing back her chair, 'I couldn't do it, at all; I couldn't really. It's an abominable little thing. How angry it looks! I wouldn't touch it—to say nothing of lifting it bodily from the fire—for anything that could be offered.'

As she speaks she turns quite round, and thus brings herself face to face with Muriel, the poor, rich, titled thing, who would have given all her possessions to-night to be able to mingle with them, with a heart free from care, in their gay *idlesse*. Even the fire has sent a vague touch of warmth and comfort into her angry heart. As she meets Margery's glance she makes a step forward.

The rustle of her gown, joined to Margery's silence, rouses Mrs. Billy from her tragic examination of the kettle. She turns, and would perhaps have given way to the expression of dismay that rises to her lips, but for the swift glimpse she gets of Margery's face. The girl is livid. In a second Mrs. Billy has conquered herself, and is advancing towards Lady Branksmere with rather an increase of the *débonnaire* manner that belongs to her.

'You are just in time,' she cries, with an air of open jollity that does her credit. 'We have been dining at that wretched old Sir Mutius Mumm's again, and as usual have come home starving. The servants for the most part were in bed, so Margery and I decided upon making a raid on the larder for ourselves, and we haven't done so badly, have we? The only drawback to our success lies in the fact that I had made up my mind to a cup of tea, and the kettle has proved too much for us. But you have had a good long walk, eh? You are tired? Meg,' with a swift glance at Margery, 'will you and Angelica make yet another predatory excursion, and see if you couldn't impound some Madeira?'

Margery, obeying the look that bids her take Angelica out of the room, beckons to the latter and goes hastily upon her errand. When the door has closed upon them, Mrs. Billy turns to Muriel.

'Now, what is it?' she asks promptly.

'It is of no use your banishing Meg,' returns Lady Branks-

mere coldly. 'She must know it all soon. The whole world will know it. I have left that place for ever.'

'You have left your husband?'

'If you wish to put it so—yes. For myself I feel more as if I had left Madame von Thirsk and all the vile associations that have degraded my married life.'

'All?' questions Mrs. Billy with a searching glance. That it is a hazardous hint to throw out to a woman in Muriel's frame of mind she well knows, yet to refrain from it seems cowardice. Lady Branksmere takes it rather better than she had expected.

'You, too, condemn me then?' she says slowly; 'I have no friend anywhere.'

'Don't encourage morbid nonsense,' says Mrs. Billy directly, in a strong breezy tone. 'See here: I think you had better sit down and tell me all about it.' She presses her gently into an arm-chair. Exhausted, physically and mentally, Muriel leans back amongst the cushions, and sighs heavily. Then suddenly she breaks into a recital of her wrongs; not loudly or passionately, but in a cold angry way that somehow is more impressive. Once or twice during her hurried explanation of her presence, Mrs. Daryl had changed colour, and now it is with her face partially averted that she speaks.

'This man—this friend of yours—Captain Staines,' she says. 'He is in the way, it seems to me.'

'Not in *my* way,' haughtily.

'In yours principally, I should say. Has he not, perhaps, some other acquaintances who would be glad to receive him for a time?'

'I shall not tell him to go if you mean that. I, who have been so grossly insulted, shall not be the one to give in, and by such an act almost acknowledge myself in the wrong.'

'Get rid of Captain Staines,' says Mrs. Billy, a little doggedly, and almost as though she had not heard her. Neither of them had noticed the entrance of Dick some minutes before, or, if they had, had given it no thought. He had been as usual buried in his beloved books in the library, and had perhaps heard Muriel's coming. He had certainly evinced no surprise at her presence on entering the prettily lighted room where she now is, and had offered her no greeting. As though fearful of disturbing her story, he had dropped into the chair nearest to the door, and, resting his

elbows on a table close to him, had let his chin fall into his palms, and so listened intently to the revelation that in her hot wrath she had poured forth. Perhaps he had had his doubts before about the happiness of this his favourite sister; perhaps now he is bent on solving them. There is something about the tall, pale, bookish lad suggestive of suppressed but excited thought. As Muriel pauses, hardly knowing what to say to Mrs. Billy's persistence, he produces himself, and comes eagerly forward.

'Billy is her eldest brother. Billy should be told,' he says, with a touch of imperiousness in his tone that reminds one strangely of Muriel's own. He looks as he speaks at Billy's wife, who receives the charge with great gallantry.

'First we must think,' she says.

'If you don't tell him to-morrow, I shall,' the embryo statesman warns her stolidly, with a flame in his eyes that belies the calmness of his tone. He lays his long, nervous fingers on Muriel's wrist, who starts, and trembles out of the sad waking dream into which she has fallen, and, turning, looks at him. He is so tall, so pale, so young, this defender of hers, so pure at heart. She draws her breath bitterly as she stoops and presses a kiss upon that loving hand.

When the boy has gone back to his midnight oil and his ambitious dreams so surely to be fulfilled, she turns again to Wilhelmina with a softened air.

'I didn't know he was here,' she says. 'Is he always up so late?'

'Very often.'

'Too often,' vehemently. 'Did you see how white his beautiful face was?'

'Yes. It is desperately bad for him, I know, to so squander his hours of rest; but he is a genius, it seems, and when you fall in with one of that sort I guess you had better give him plenty of line,' says Mrs. Billy, with a sage nod or two. She would perhaps have said more but that here Margery and Angelica re-enter the room; Margery pale and depressed, Angelica distinctly curious.

'Do not send me away again,' cries Margery softly, appealing to Muriel. 'I am so unhappy! There is something wrong I know; something between you and Branksmere?'

'You see what folly it would be to aim at secrecy,' says Muriel bitterly, to Mrs. Daryl. 'Instinct has pointed out to her the truth.'

'Oh! is it about poor George?' exclaims Angelica regretfully, who had long ago elected to like 'poor George,' and to find a wide field for pity in the barrenness of his wedded life. 'What an unfortunate thing it is that you can't love him!'

This innocent speech has the effect of a bombshell thrown into their midst.

'Go to bed, Angelica,' cries Lady Branksmere, starting to her feet and trembling visibly. 'It is *horrible* that children like you should be allowed to have a voice in——'

'I am not a child,' interrupts Angelica plaintively, who is indeed deeply grieved at the thought that she has in some way given offence. 'And I did not mean to hurt you, dear Muriel. It is not your fault, I know. It is quite as sad a thing that *he* can't love *you*!'

Lady Branksmere shrinks away from her.

'Angelica, how *can* you?' cries Margery indignantly, and Mrs. Billy, coming to the rescue, lays her hand on the unfortunate Angelica's arm and guides her to the door.

'But what is it—what have I done?' protests she through her tears.

'Everything—nothing,' returns Mrs. Billy incoherently. 'You will understand when your own time comes. Never mind what you have done; what you have got to do now is to—skedaddle.'

She pushes the girl softly out of the room, and Angelica, in high dudgeon, disappears from the scene. Margery is kneeling beside Lady Branksmere, and has taken her sister's cold hand in both hers.

'Tell me what has happened,' she entreats, looking round at Mrs. Daryl.

'There has been a misunderstanding. It will not last, I trust,' explains Mrs. Billy in a low tone.

'Why do you seek to soften matters?' exclaims Lady Branksmere irritably. 'I tell you, Margery, I have left him. I have left a house where all day long I was insulted by that woman's presence.'

'If you think there is anything between her and your husband——' begins Mrs. Billy.

'*Think!*'

'Well, why don't you go straight to him and just put it to him that you can't be happy while she remains at the Castle. Speak boldly to him. Throw yourself on his gene-

rosity. I believe half this is mere imagination of yours. And at all events *speak*. Why should one be afraid of one's husband ?'

'Ah !' A long drawn breath escapes Muriel ; '*you are a happy wife*,' she says ; '*you cannot comprehend a case like mine*.' Her hands fall inertly into her lap in a weary, purposeless fashion, that goes to Margery's soul.

'Demand the truth !' persists Mrs. Billy in a tone slightly raised, in the hope of rousing Muriel from her sad musing.

'And what if I have done so,' says she at last, 'and got no satisfaction ?'

'Do so again and again until you do—one way or the other.'

'I cannot,' declares Muriel wearily. 'I am tired of it all. And even if I *would*, opportunity is denied me. That woman, of late, haunts him ; they are together from morning till night.'

'But not from night till morning,' says Mrs. Billy briskly.

Muriel's lips grow white. She throws out her arms protestingly.

'*Who can say !*' she answers in a low voice full of terrible suspicion, her eyes on the ground.

Mrs. Daryl is shocked : Margery bursts into tears.

'Oh, Muriel darling, why will you destroy your own happiness by harbouring such sad beliefs ! I am sure Branksmere in his heart is true to you, but there are little things that——'

'Pshaw !' says Lady Branksmere impatiently, pushing her away. 'Am I a fool to be cajoled by such words as these ? Put faith in him, you, if you will—it will doubtless' (bitterly) 'save you trouble—but I—who *know* !—— It is monstrous, I tell you.'

'But it seems to me,' persists Margery eagerly, 'that he is not that—that kind of person. He is too self-contained perhaps—but hardly dishonourable.'

'Well, I have not come here to listen to Branksmere's praises,' says Muriel, rising abruptly to her feet, with a short laugh. 'If you are a partisan of his, of course I need not trouble you with my views of the affair. If I cannot get sympathy here in my old home, from my own sister, I need hardly look for it anywhere. After all,' with a miserable attempt at indifference, 'why should I expect anyone to enter into my griefs ?'

'Don't speak to me like that, Muriel,' cries Margery. 'Between you and me such words are cruel.'

'Let us think what is best to be done,' breaks in Mrs. Billy, in a matter-of-fact tone.

'There is nothing to be done.'—Lady Branksmere turns upon her with flashing eyes. 'Do you imagine I am going to truckle to a man who is not only false to me, but who takes me to task for my behaviour with—with one who is an old friend?'

'An old *lover*,' corrects Mrs. Billy, in a strange tone. 'Let us keep to the strict facts. You were alluding to Captain Staines?'

'Oh! Muriel, there is something to be said about that!' cries Margery, a very agony of nervous horror in her eyes. To *have* to speak! Who shall estimate the misery of it? 'Think, darling, think,' she says, and then with trembling hands outheld she goes closer to her sister. 'Oh, dear, *dear* heart,' she sobs. 'Give up all thought of that bad man.'

'Who is bad?' asks Lady Branksmere coldly, with wilful miscomprehension. 'Branksmere?'

'No, no,' miserably, 'Captain Staines. Muriel! be warned about him in time. I don't know why, but instinct tells me to distrust him. Oh, darling! I know you mean nothing—*ever*—but what is good and sweet, but if you could only understand how wretched you make me at times!'

'Do I?' Lady Branksmere is looking down at her with grieved eyes. 'Is it not enough, then, that I am unhappy myself—but that it must be my luckless fate to make those I love unhappy, too? One's life, one's circumstances, what scourges they may be!' She sighs heavily.

'Have a glass of wine,' says Mrs. Billy, who after all is nothing if not practical.

At this moment the sound of a footstep in the hall outside makes itself heard. Muriel starts into an intenser life, and springing to her feet looks with angry eyes towards the door.

'It is he,' she says. 'He has followed me.'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

The hatred of those who are most nearly connected is the most inveterate.

It is, in fact, Branksmere's step. He had found his way through the armoury door that she had left open, and is now in the hall. A faint light coming from beneath the library door attracts his attention; involuntarily he turns towards it, and finds himself presently staring at Dick across a reading lamp.

'Where is your sister?' demands he, in an aggressive tone.

'Margery and Angelica are in the next room, I think; the twins in bed,' retorts Dick frowningly. He has got upon his feet, and is looking at Branksmere with open enmity in his glance. 'Of my *eldest* sister you should know more than me.'

'Is she here?'

'That is a strange question for you to ask. Where should she be at this hour but beneath your roof—unless she was driven to leave it?'

'A truce to bombast,' says Branksmere impatiently. 'By your manner I can see she is here. Go and tell her I wish to speak to her.' His tone is imperious.

'You are a scoundrel,' exclaims the boy, choking with rage.

Branksmere shrugs his shoulders.

'Your manners are hardly your strong point,' he says, with a contemptuous lifting of his brows. 'That, however, fortunately concerns you, not me. Where is Muriel?'

'With her own people. In her own home. What do you want with her?'

'Not much at any time: yet there are moments when even a husband may find it necessary to have an interview with the woman he has married. Will "her own people," mimicking the boy's somewhat grandiloquent air to a nicety, "permit it, do you think?"'

'I wonder you are not ashamed to mention her,' cries Dick, with a sudden burst of passion. 'Yes, she is here. She came half an hour ago. She went to Willy's boudoir. I followed her there, and heard—heard—you *know* what I heard.—She looked so tired, so worn.'

'I don't, I assure you,' says Branksmere, ignoring the latter part of his speech. 'You give me credit for far too much perspicacity.'

'She came in looking so white, so miserable, that even you, had you seen her, might have felt some pity for her in your cold heart.'

'I shouldn't,' replies Branksmere distinctly. 'Attribute to me no extra graces, I entreat you. *Pity* for her is the very last thing I should have felt.'

'I should have known that,' says young Daryl, in a low voice, who is now fast losing his self-control. 'Muriel prepared me for it.'

'Muriel is a fool, and you are another,' says Branksmere coolly. 'I am not!'

The blood recedes from Dick's brow and his large eyes glow. With an inarticulate cry he rushes forward and flings himself upon his adversary. In a moment he has his young lithe fingers fastened into his collar. He is a tall lad, but slender, and in less time than one can picture it, his attack is at an end, and Branksmere has him in his powerful grasp. Twisting his arms behind him so as to leave him powerless and at his mercy, he looks for a minute full into the boy's defiant face.

'The same blood,' he says, with a sneer that ends in a groan, and by a sudden movement he releases his foe and sends him staggering back a few paces from him. For a little while he regards him with a stormy expression in his eyes and then—— 'Pshaw!' he says contemptuously, and turning on his heel quits the room.

A few steps bring him to that other room where three pale women are awaiting his coming. One, indeed, standing forward with her eyes afire as though eager for the battle.

Entering, he closes the door heavily behind him and looks straight at his wife, taking no notice whatsoever of Mrs. Daryl or Margery.

'It is rather a late hour for visiting,' he says. 'Are you ready to come home?'

'I am at home.'

'Are you ready, then, to return to the Castle?' His voice, though subdued, is vibrating with rage. His face is white, his lips set. There is a dangerous light in his sombre eyes.

'To prison? No!' returns Muriel defiantly.

She had stood up at his entrance, had even taken a step

towards him, and now confronts him with a whole world of scorn in her beautiful face. Her bare arms, white and rounded, are hanging by her sides, the hands clenched. Her bosom is rising and falling tumultuously. She looks surpassingly lovely in her scorn and anger; but to Branksmere she might be a creature formed of Nature's worst, so coldly does his glance rest upon her.

'I hope you will reconsider that answer,' he says slowly. There is something in his manner and the set determination of his tone that frightens Margery.

'Muriel, take care!' she whispers warningly, and places her hand on the back of her sister's arm, and presses it stealthily with fingers that are trembling with nervous agitation. But Lady Branksmere takes no outward heed of this gentle admonition.

'I shall reconsider nothing.' The words fall from her coldly, clearly.

'Is that your final decision?' As he speaks he makes a slight movement towards the door, as though the parley has come to an end. It is evident to all he is not going to dispute the decision, or seek to alter it in any way. Mrs. Billy goes quickly up to Muriel.

'I implore you not to let things go too far,' she says. 'Be reasonable. The world's opinion is worth a good deal.'

At this, Muriel's long felt irritation takes light, and flames into life.

'What do you all mean?' she cries with a burst of passion. 'Do you want to get rid of me? Am I a disgrace to you?'

'Muriel! What folly! My dear girl, *think!*' entreats Mrs. Billy earnestly.

'What *can* I think but that I am not wanted by anyone, here, or there, or anywhere! May I not rest beneath your roof for even *one* night?'

'If you leave *my* roof (under such circumstances as these) for one night, you leave it for ever,' interposes Branksmere sternly.

'An awful threat truly,' exclaims she, with a short laugh full of reckless defiance.

'Oh, Muriel!' implores Margery, beneath her breath, who is now sobbing bitterly.

'Am I to understand that you encourage Lady Branksmere in her present conduct?' demands Branksmere, turning

furiously at this juncture upon Mrs. Billy. He had not heard her whispered advice of a moment since, and plainly regards her as an accomplice. Mrs. Billy very justly resents his tone.

'I tell you what, Branksmere,' returns she with considerable spirit, 'you are taking the wrong turning here. Muriel has hinted to me such and such matters, and I *will* say that I think there are several little affairs down there'—pointing in a characteristic fashion in a direction that she fondly but erroneously believes might take her to the Castle, but which would be quite as likely to take her to Japan—'that you would do well to explain.'

'You will permit me, madam, to be the best judge of my own actions,' retorts he icily.

'No, I won't,' says Mrs. Billy, with quite a beautiful immovability. 'In my opinion you are just the worst judge. I think well enough of you, you see, to believe you might explain if you only would, and I'd strongly advise you to do it before a crisis arrives. See?' She nods her head at him vigorously.

'I see nothing,' replies he coldly.

'Then all I can say is,' exclaims Mrs. Billy, with extreme wrath, 'that I no longer blame Muriel, and that if you were my husband I'd—*smash you!*'

'Providence, madam, probably foresaw that,' says Branksmere dryly. He makes her an almost imperceptible salutation and turns again to Muriel.

'Are you coming?' he asks with a frown.

'Yes; she is,' returns Mrs. Billy unabashed. She throws, as she speaks, a light shawl round Muriel in a way that admits of no dispute, and indeed Muriel, who is now looking tired, and exhausted, and hopeless, makes no effort to resist her.

'As you all wish it; as I am unwelcome here, and only a trouble, I will go,' she says wearily.

'Oh! no, darling! Do not speak like that,' sobs Margery, clinging to her.

'But not now—not just yet,' goes on Lady Branksmere, hardly heeding her tender embrace. 'In a little while I will go back. But not *quite* now.'

'You will come now, or not at all!' Branksmere interrupts her doggedly. 'I will have no gossip—no damning whispers.'

Margery lifts her head impetuously, and would perhaps have spoken but that Mrs. Billy checks her.

‘He is right—quite right. Let there be no scandal,’ she whispers wisely. ‘They both came down to visit us to-night. *Both*. Together. You will remember? It was an idle freak. There was nothing in it.’ She pushes Muriel as she speaks towards the door. Branksmere, who is standing next to it, puts out his hand as his wife approaches, and, though still with a lowering brow, would have drawn hers through his arm. But with a gesture of extreme repugnance she pushes him aside and hurries from the room.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Jealousy is love lost in a mist.

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‘I DON’T see how we can do much more to the altar without the grapes,’ says Margery, standing well back from the rails, with her charming head delicately poised to one side, the better to comprehend the effect of her work. ‘They should be here by this time. I doubt that Branksmere’s gardener isn’t a man of his word!’

‘It is most remiss of him,’ says Mr. Goldie severely. Mr. Goldie is the curate; a young man of faultless morals and irreproachable clothes, with bolting blue eyes and nice plump cheeks, who has been following Miss Daryl about all the day (indeed, for the matter of that, all the year), and who seems to have small object in life except to stare mutely at her, and hang upon her lightest word. So open has been his worship, so reprehensible, that several of the old maids flung loose about the parish have mingled execrations of him with their evening prayers, and have all had serious thoughts of reporting his abominable conduct to the Bishop.

Mr. Goldie has cared for none of these things. He is now regarding his divinity with a frown upon his slightly narrow brow, meant not for her, but for the recreant minion at Branksmere who has dared to keep her waiting, and who, in Mr. Goldie’s eyes, is plainly on the fair road to make acquaintance with the new gentleman—who has kindly come forward to relieve us of our criminals—and his rope.

Yet again, a summer fair and sweet lies slain, and autumn, that rich conqueror, is strewing the earth with his spoils. From Branksmere all the guests have melted away with sunny June—some to a last week or so in town, some to their own homes in the neighbourhood, some in hot haste to the Engadine, so intensely suffocating had the weather proved here.

Tommy Paulyn has run down to stay with the Daryls for a while, and Captain Staines, who had put in a month with the Blounts, has now hired a neat little box of a place about a mile from Branksmere, ostensibly for the shooting.

To feel one's self well into September—that mildest, tenderest, most mournful month of all the year—(so full, as it is, of a glad past, so fraught with cruel fears of a harsh future)—is to know a sense of the most chastened, the most exquisite enjoyment. The vicar, for certain goodly reasons, had been obliged to put off his harvest thanksgiving festival until rather late this year, but now the ancient, moss-grown church is alive with the voice of the decorator, and is so disorderly in appearance because of the branches and flowers and fruits and vegetable offerings so profusely flung in a helter-skelter fashion amongst its respectable aisles and decent pews, that one feels instinctively sorry for the lost dignity of the poor old thing. Wreaths are hanging from, or twining themselves round, every available pillar; flowers are lying about in a gorgeous profusion. Nothing remains to be desired save the Branksmere grapes.

'They will be here soon, Meg. It was my fault—the delay,' says Lady Branksmere, who has come down to look round her perhaps, because she certainly hasn't assisted them in any way. She is looking pale, and not altogether her best; one must be happy to look that.

'Let us see to the completion of the chancel, then,' says Mr. Goldie, in his most pompous tone. 'I fear those we left in charge' (he says the 'we' with a fond but unfortunately rather foolish look at Margery) 'are not quite as steady as we could wish them.'

Miss Daryl, with an inward regret that she cannot make *him* as unsteady as *she* could wish him, follows him into the presence of a most boisterous group who are busy amongst ferns and cauliflowers. Tommy Paulyn on the top of a ladder is giving way to much abuse to the boys, interlarded with tender speeches, directed at the bevy of pretty damsels beneath.

'Dear me, Tommy, I never thought to see you so high up in the world,' Miss Daryl calls out to him jeeringly. She feels her spirits rise as she gets into the middle of them, having been rather depressed by Mr. Goldie's attentions during the last half-hour.

'I'll descend to your level in a moment or two,' responds the Hon. Tommy affably; 'meantime I wish somebody would do *something*. Here I am stuck up aloft, and not a soul will give me a helping hand. Have those massive edibles run short, or do the ferns grow shy? Who's responsible for the loss of time? Shiver my timbers! but I'll know the meaning of all this when next I set foot on *terra firma*. Neat and appropriate remark, eh, Miss Jones? Ladders are timbers. See? If you were to shiver *my* timbers at this moment I should be—where should I be, Mr. Goldie?'

Mr. Goldie looks very properly indignant, and Miss Jones having suppressed her giggle, Angelica casts a withering glance at the unabashed Tommy.

'Come down,' she says sternly. Mr. Paulyn, though plainly impressed by her severity, still hesitates.

'Angelica,' he says in a propitiatory way. No answer.

'"Angel, ever bright and fair."' Still the third Miss Daryl maintains a dignified reserve.

'All right, then,' says Mr. Paulyn, now driven to desperation, 'I'll come down and have it out with you.' He scrambles down from his perch, and having inserted his hand in Angelica's arm carries her off *volens volens* to have it out in the churchyard.

'How pretty it begins to look,' says Mrs. Daryl, gazing round her at the bright leaves, and fruits, and flowers. She addresses Margery.

'Very. They are all new designs, those arrangements over there. Curzon got them from town. From what house, Curzon? No,' to one of the twins who is soliciting her consent about something, 'indeed, not. You know you have a cold. You must not run about the churchyard without some muffling.'

'Oh, Meg! But I'm so hot!'

'Well,' relenting in part, 'you may go out for half an hour or so, but no more; because the evening is growing chilly. You must come in then, and put on your coat. Now be off, but remember—in half an hour I shall expect you. I depend upon you to come.'

The child's face falls.

'I think,' she says disconsolately, 'that I'll put on the coat now, Meg, before I go. Because I don't know what half an hour is, and I'm *sure* I'm not to be depended upon.'

Mrs. Billy, who is near, bursts out laughing.

'What a conscientious little creature!' she says. 'There!' taking Blanche's hand, 'you shall have something nice for that when we get home; and now run away and be happy without your coat, because I'll watch the time, and I'll see that you are called in half an hour to do Meg's bidding.'

'I'm so afraid of her catching cold,' explains Meg apologetically.

'What an imprudent fear!' declares Tommy Paulyn, who has once more returned to their midst in high feather, with a propitiated Angel beside him. 'Catch your cold by all means, my dear Blanche, and hold it tight and bring it to me, and I'll soon cut the head off it.'

To Blanche this seems such an exquisite joke that she runs off roaring with laughter in her small, happy way.

'Look at Meg trying to wear out her fingers with that thorny stuff,' says Peter admiringly. 'Was there ever so plastic a being?—indolent to-day, full of pluck to-morrow. Her nails are one of her good points; she might consider them.'

'It seems to me,' puts in Mr. Goldie mildly, with a reproachful glance at the young men round him, amongst whom are Curzon Bellew and Mr. Paulyn, 'that Miss Daryl might be spared such arduous work. Her zeal is so great that it outstrips her strength.'

'It strips her skin,' supplements the Hon. Tommy, who seldom minces matters. 'It will play old Harry with her hands, and they used to be tolerable.'

'Your cousin, Mr. Paulyn, has the most beautiful hands in the world,' says the curate solemnly. 'So white! so fine!'

'Fine!' echoes Peter with a gay laugh. 'They *should* be! Why, I should think they ought to be almost kissed away by this time!'

Upon two of the audience this startling remark makes a distinct effect. Mr. Goldie regards the speaker with a sanctified disgust, and Curzon Bellew looks as if he would like to slaughter somebody. Mr. Goldie, who happens to be nearest to him, first speaks.

'I am sure, Peter,' says the reverend gentleman, with

ecclesiastical reproach, 'that your sister would be deeply grieved could she hear you ascribe to her such frivolous ways.'

'I haven't ascribed anything to *her*,' declares Peter, who is growing amused. 'It is the young men who have reduced her poor paws to their present state of attenuation who ought to be taken to task.'

'I think it is not well that you should in such a public—in fact in such a—er—*sacred* place discuss your sister at all. It would be offensive to many, I am sure, to be so spoken of. Could she—that is would she—I mean '—floundering hopelessly—'*were* she the object of my affections I should——'

'Oh, Mr. Goldie! to call poor Margery an "object!" I wouldn't have believed it of you. And we used to think you quite her friend! Margery!' calling lustily, 'do you know what Mr. Goldie says of——'

'No, no, no, I *entreat!*' exclaims the poor curate, almost laying his hand on Peter's mouth, who is in ecstasies. 'I meant nothing—only to defend your sister from——'

'And who the deuce are *you*, sir, to set yourself up as Miss Daryl's champion?' exclaims Bellew, with a burst of wrath that has been gathering above the head of the luckless curate for over a month. 'When she needs a friend to plead her cause she will know where to look for an older one than you!'

After this, chaos—and a general rout. The bystanders very wisely abscond, and even Margery herself very meanly slips round a corner into the vestry room, feeling assured that Curzon's black looks and Mr. Goldie's red ones have something to do with her.

But in the vestry vengeance overtakes her. Mr. Goldie, either stung to action by Bellew's conduct, or eager to 'put it to the touch, to win or lose it all,' follows her there and lays himself, his goods and chattels, *all*—(which is very little)—at her feet. It takes only a few minutes, and then Margery emerges again into the wider air outside, a little flushed, a little repentant, perhaps, for those half-hours of innocent coquetry that had led the wretched man to his doom, to find herself in the midst of a home group composed of Peter, Dick, Angelica, and Mr. Bellew. The latter is standing gloomily apart; the others make towards her.

'We saw him following you—well? What? He must have said *something*! We saw it in his eye; a sort of "now

or never," "do or die," look. Get it out, Meg, you'll be any amount happier when you have got it off your conscience.'

'It is abominable of you all,' exclaims Margery. But even as this rebuke escapes her so does an irrepressible laugh.

'Come. No shirking,' says Dick, as she makes a futile effort to dodge them and gain the door beyond. 'I told you that gown would be the ruin of someone. It is too racy.'

'And you look simply lovely in it,' declares Angelica, who is devoured with curiosity, and thinks flattery a wise medium for the extraction of secrets. 'Now, go on, do! Tell us what he said to you. Did he propose to you? Meg, on your soul be it if you lie!'

Margery's glance roves from one to the other. It alternates between an anxious desire to escape and be at rest, and a mild longing to tell them of her latest victory.

'Well, to tell you the truth,' begins she.

'Oh! come. That won't do. No lies!' says Peter promptly. 'Did he or did he not ask you to marry him?'

'Why should he do that?' asks Meg, at bay.

'Why shouldn't he? I'm sure you've had him dangling after you long enough for anything. And to-day you've flirted with him at every opportunity and pillar, until even *we* thought you meant to accept him.'

'Perhaps you thought right,' says Miss Daryl, goaded into retribution. This speech is received in silence; evidently they hardly know whether or not a grain of truth may be hidden in it. Mr. Bellew lifts his head with the quick action of one who is shot, and looks straight at her.

'Oh, no, Meg,' declares Angelica gently. 'You would not marry that conceited little man, I know. He thinks too much of himself to be anything but odious. I'm sure he looks upon himself as the "Church's one foundation," without which it would totter to its fall.'

'You shouldn't hurt my feelings,' returns Margery, with such a gay little laugh that at once equanimity is restored.

'Tell us how he got through it,' says Dick, seizing her arm. Perhaps there may be a brotherly pinch enclosed in his grasp, because he receives an instant answer.

'Well, he said—Oh, Dick, don't——'

'What a story!' exclaims Angelica, very naturally.

'No. He said first in a solemn tone, *à propos* of the decorations in other corners of the globe, "It is a pity they

should waste so much time over art, to the exclusion of the more vital matters!" That was all.'

'All about *that*,' persists Dick, who would have made a splendid Inquisitor. 'But how about yourself? The last remark was in the style of the best form of tract; but what is he like when spooning, eh?'

'What did he *say*?' asks Angelica.

'He said,' returns Miss Daryl desperately, "'Will you? Won't you? Don't you?'" At which I said (not dreaming what the old absurdity was thinking of), "Shall I? Shan't I? Don't I? Do I? *What*?" And then it all came out! And I'm sure I'm very sorry, because I never meant to encourage him.'

'Not you,' says Peter. 'A scalp more or less is nothing to you, bless you. Well, and what did *you* say?'

'No; of course. I was so thoroughly unprepared that——'

'Meg was meek and Meg was mild,
And bonny Meg was Nature's child,'

quotes Dick, *sotto voce*.

'You needn't jeer at me,' says Meg reproachfully. 'I may be bad, but, at all events, I am not worse! And I know I never led him on so far as I did the others because——'

She stops abruptly, her eyes having by chance lighted upon the wrathful visage of Bellew, who has been lounging in the shade of the lectern.

'It is just as well you didn't accept him. He wouldn't suit you. He looks as if he belonged to one of the lost tribes,' says Dick. 'Do you think he will bear malice? Must you give him a wide berth for the future?'

'Poor Mr. Goldie! No. He is a very good little man,' answers Angelica pitifully.

'With a heart of gold,' puts in Peter mildly.

'I say, children, where are you all?' cries Mrs. Billy at this moment, calling to them through the gathering gloom. They run to her, all save Margery, who would, indeed, gladly have beaten an ignominious retreat in their train, and so avoided the moody young man so plainly lying in wait for her. But he proves too much for even *her* strategies.

'I want to speak to you,' exclaims he, grasping her by the ribbons that ornament the side of her gown, as she endeavours to slip past him. Of course the ribbons give way, and he finds

himself the happy possessor of them, with a most indignant Margery demanding an explanation of his conduct.

'I really do wish, Curzon, you would try to learn the meaning of the word "manners,"' she says angrily, looking at the ravished ribbons. 'I have always told you your temper will be your destruction. *Now* see where it has led you.' Secretly she is delighted at the chance afforded her of putting him in the wrong.

'I'm sorry for your gown,' says Mr. Bellew, who indeed does look rather shocked. 'But speak to you I *will*. So all this last month, when you were pretending to be so quiet, you were cajoling that miserable Goldie into falling in love with you.'

'What do you mean, Curzon? Do you know what you are saying? Are you going to tell me that I encouraged him?'

'You must have encouraged him disgracefully, when he had the—the audacity to propose to you.'

'If you hadn't been meanly listening to what wasn't meant for your ears, you wouldn't have known that.'

'Certainly I listened. I shall always listen to anything that concerns *you*.'

'Well! Anything so dishonourable——'

'I don't care a fig whether it is dishonourable or not. I'm determined I'll know, at all events. So that's what brought you to the weekly practice so regularly. All your interest in the fiddling and psalming of this wretched village choir lay in your desire to add yet another scalp to your belt.'

'Go on, don't mind me,' murmurs Miss Daryl, with ominous sweetness.

'It was Mr. Goldie this and Mr. Goldie that. I must have been *blind* not to see it all. You permitted him to make love to you, and to consider himself your mentor in all things.'

'Did I?' with awful dignity. 'I wasn't aware of it. At all events,' with an angry flash from her soft eyes, 'I never gave anyone permission to be my *tormentor*.'

'There can be no more abominable coquetry than the leading on of a man to offer you his best for the mere pleasure of refusing him. You know you never meant to marry him.'

'Is that my crime? Would you prefer that I *should* marry him?'

'Margery! What a speech to make to me.'

'Are you to have all the pretty speeches to yourself? Be happy, however, in the certainty that I shall never marry either him or you.'

'I have said perhaps too much. I have a beastly temper, I know, though I never seem to remember it until I am with you,' says Bellew, brushing his hand across his forehead with a sigh. 'But you don't mean that, Margery!'

'To marry Mr. Goldie?'

'No, not to marry me.'

'Certainly I mean it.'

'Only last week you gave me to understand that you would be my wife.'

'"Might" was the word used, I think.'

'Well, "might" let it be.'

'I've changed my mind since then.'

'That's the fifth time you have changed it this year.'

'Be satisfied. It shall be the last, I promise you.'

'You mean,' growing once more wrathful, 'that you *won't* marry me.'

'That is it.'

'But why?' demands he indignantly. 'What's the matter with me, I'd like to know. Why can't you make up your mind to it?'

'A jealous man makes a miserable home,' quotes she sentimentously.

'Who is jealous? Do you think I should feel jealous of that unfortunate little long-tailed parson in there?' pointing to the vestry door, behind which Mr. Goldie is supposed to be clothed in sackcloth and ashes. 'Give me credit for better sense than that. No, I am only annoyed that you should—er—that he should—that er—in fact—'

'We should?' suggests Miss Daryl demurely, as he breaks down hopelessly.

There is a pause. He looks at her appealingly. There is so much submission in his glance that Margery, whose ill-temperers are fleeting, stealing a look at him from under her curling lashes, forgives him. She struggles with herself for a moment, and then bursts into the gayest of pretty laughs.

'I'm a cross old cat, am I not?' she says penitently, tucking her arm into his. 'Never mind. I'm very fond of you, after all, in spite of your many enormities.'

'You are an angel,' returns he, with all the sweet folly of a real lover. He takes her hands and lifts them.

At this instant a piercing cry full of agony comes to them from the inner porch. Margery's face blanches.

'What was that? What?' she cries, in a terrible whisper. And then—'*It was May's voice,*' she cries, and rushes past him to the spot from whence the sound came.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A viper in the bosom, who, while he was chill, was harmless; but when warmth gave him strength, exerted it in poison.

UPON the stone pavement the little form is lying quite motionless. The ladder from which she had fallen is still quivering from the shock. There is a moment's breathless pause and then it is Lady Branksmere—the cold, the impassive—who first reaches her. She gathers the little still child gently to her breast, holding her to her with a pressure passionate but very soft, and looks up at Curzon—who, with Margery, is at her side almost at once—with a glance full of the acutest anguish. This little home bird, this small link upon the chain that binds her to all things good, is it going from her?

The despair in her eyes startles Mrs. Daryl, and even at this supreme moment sets her wondering. If this undemonstrative woman can thus love a little sister, how could she not love—— She hardly finishes her own thought, a moan from the child going to her very heart.

'Let me see,' says Curzon, bending over Lady Branksmere's burden as if to take it.

'No, no,' she entreats eagerly. 'But tell me the truth; she is not——'

'Of course not,' interrupts he hastily. 'Her heart is beating. The arms—yes—all the little limbs are sound, It is only a light matter, believe me.'

The child stirs uneasily in her embrace, and, opening her eyes, looks vaguely round her, then once more sinks into unconsciousness.

'I will take her home with me. Who will go for a doctor?' demands Lady Branksmere, staggering to her feet with Curzon's aid, but never losing her hold of the injured child.

'Peter has already gone. But we have told him to go direct home,' says Margery. 'Dear Muriel, the doctor will

be there before us, so you see it would be madness to take her to the Castle. Come with us, and hear what his opinion will be.' She breaks down a little. 'Oh, it *must* be a favourable one,' she sobs miserably.

After all, it is! 'May had sustained a severe shock,' said little Dr. Bland; had fractured her collar bone and bruised one arm very badly, but otherwise there was no reason for supposing she would not be on her feet again in no time. Lady Branksmere, having listened to this comforting assurance, had suffered herself to be driven home with the declared intention of coming up again to-night to hear the very last account, at eleven possibly—certainly not before—as there were some prosy old country folk coming to dinner.

It is now eleven, and a lovely, starlit night it is. Almost as the big clock in the further end of the hall gives up its last stroke, Muriel steps across the threshold of her old home, and wrapped in her big plush cloak hurries along the hall and up the staircase to the room of the little invalid. The hush, the silence, the lowered lamp, all seem to impress her. She falls upon her knees beside the pretty snowy cot, and gazes with anxious, sorrowful eyes at its small occupant.

'She looks already better. She sleeps placidly,' she whispers, turning to Angelica.

'All is well with her,' whispers Angelica back again. 'Do not be so troubled about her. She has taken nourishment and spoken to us all, and to-night Willie and Nurse sit up with her; to-morrow night they have promised to Margery, and the next to me'—with subdued pride.

'Wilhelmina is very good,' says Lady Branksmere, rising to her feet. With the assurance of the child's safety there has returned to her her usual coldness and apparent unconcern. They have all been apportioned their night to watch beside the precious little sufferer—but there is nothing for her. She has been cast off from them. She has chosen her own bed, so let her lie. She kisses Angelica and steals from the room. Below, Margery and Mrs. Billy meet her.

'She is better; immensely better.'

'Going already, Muriel? But we could send you home in an hour or so. It is not so very late. Barely eleven.'

'I have my maid, Bridgman. She is as good as a regiment,' returns Muriel, faintly smiling. 'No, you must not trouble yourselves. I shall come up again in the morning to see how the poor mite is getting on.'

Her manner is altogether changed; is kindly, but no longer consumed with anxiety. There is a suspicion of strain about it, and a chill that communicates itself.

'Do let me order the brougham for you,' says Mrs. Billy hospitably.

'No, thank you. No, indeed. Bridgman, as I have said, is invaluable, and I shall enjoy the run through the moonlit woods.'

She bids them good-night, and disappears from them into the darkness of the rhododendrons beyond.

It is an entire surprise to herself when half way up the avenue, at the spot where one turns aside to gain the woodland path that will lead into the Branksmere domain, a dark figure emerges from a clump of myrtles and stands before her. It is Captain Staines. A sense of caution, suggested by the maid's presence, compels him to meet her coldly, and as one might who is surprised by her presence here at such an hour.

'Rather late for you, Lady Branksmere, isn't it? Hadn't a suspicion I should meet anything human when I came up here to-night for my usual stroll. As a rule, my cigar and I have it all to ourselves.'

Even Muriel herself believes him.

'My little sister was not well,' she explains curtly. 'I came to bid her good-night, and hear the very last news.'

Bridgman has dropped behind. In the increasing gloom of the trees she is indeed nowhere to be seen. Captain Staines taking Lady Branksmere's hand lays it courteously upon his arm.

'To see where those treacherous roots are lying in wait for us across the path is so difficult in this uncertain light,' he murmurs apologetically. And then, in a lower tone, 'I heard to-day about your grief, your anxiety. Oh, believe that I felt, too, not only for your grief, but for the pain of that dear little child.'

His tone is so sympathetic, so replete with real feeling, that Muriel's heart is touched.

'How is she now?' he asks in a low whisper. 'I would have gone up to the house to ask, but you know I am no favourite there.'

The moonlight enables her to see the little sad smile that mantles his countenance. Is *she* the cause of his rustication? A heavy sigh escapes her. She is feeling sore at heart, and

now this stranger, this outsider, how kind he is, how good; how anxious to learn of the little one's well being!

'She is better,' she answers softly; 'and as for grief—There is always grief.'

'Not always. And even if there is, there is Love the purifier, the sweetener of our lives, to step in and conquer it.'

'Is there?' Her tone is listless. Already a doubt of the love of those she has left behind in the old home is torturing her. She feels cast off, abandoned.

'Does your heart hold a doubt of it? Oh! Muriel, if I dared speak——'

'Well, you dare not,' interrupts she coldly. 'I have your word for that. Once you forgot yourself. Once,' with a burst of angry honesty, 'I, too, forgot myself. Let there be no repetition of the folly.' Then abruptly, 'When do you leave this place?'

'I don't know. I cannot bring myself to leave it.'

'But why—why?' with feverish impatience.

'I have told you long ago. I cannot leave you and your troubles.'

'What are my troubles to you?' demands she fiercely. 'Let them lie. There is but one service you can do me. Yet you shrink from it.'

'Why should my absence serve you?' asks he boldly. 'Do you think he cares? Or is it that I give him a pretext for——' He checks himself suddenly. 'Do you think I have spent no weary nights over this question of my departure?' he breaks out presently, with a passion that, to do him justice, is only half feigned. 'That I have not *tried* to tear myself away? I tell you that my love for you is too strong for me. It binds me here. And besides, there is the strange certainty that some day I may be of use to you. Griefs thicken; and if I can help you even ever so lightly, are not all these weary hours of waiting well bestowed? You bid me be silent; but how can I refrain from speech when many of your sorrows are but too well known to me; your trials——'

'Of which you are chiefest,' cries she, with quick vehemence. 'Can you not guess what your staying means to me! Scorn, insult, contempt!' She presses her hands forcibly together. 'Go!' she mutters, in a low, compressed tone. 'When will you go?'

'When you will come with me!'

The words are spoken! Given to the air! Nothing can recall them!

The thought that she is cold—*shivering*—is the first that comes to her. She gathers the slight covering on her shoulders tighter round her, and her large, troubled eyes look out from the lace hood that shrouds her face with a sense of vague fear in them that is very sad. She turns them upon him.

‘Is there no friendship?’ she asks at last, slowly, sorrowfully.

‘What is friendship?’ returns Staines. ‘It is so poor a thing that no man knows where it begins or where it ends. A touch of flattery may blow it into a flame; a dispute about a five-pound note will kill it. I do not profess friendship for you. I do not believe in it; there is something stronger, more enduring than that. Muriel, trust in me.’

‘There is no friendship, you say. Is there, then, faith?’

‘In those who love you?’ eagerly. ‘Yes. If I have spoken too openly—too soon, forgive me. But should the day come’—his voice sinks to a whisper—‘when escape will become a necessity to you—and I do not think that day is far off—think of me. Remember me as one who would gladly die to serve you. If for the moment I have offended you, try to pardon me.’

They have reached the grassy hollow beyond the wood that lets the house be seen. Beyond them lies a bare slope of lawn, and then the terraces and the drawing-room windows. The latter are all ablaze. The twinkling lights from them are blown here and there across the grasses by the trembling breeze. Within the embrasure of one window two figures standing side by side can be distinctly seen.

That one is Lord Branksmere, the other Madame von Thirsk, becomes apparent to Muriel at a glance.

Branksmere is gazing idly inward, apparently at a frieze upon the wall opposite; Madame (whose thoughts are busy upon the pale beauty of the hour), outward: she had entered the drawing-room half an hour ago, hearing Branksmere was there alone, but had found him unresponsive, almost ungenial. At this moment she withdraws her fine eyes from the starry heavens and directs them keenly at the moonlit lawn. As she looks, a touch of triumph lights her face. Staines then *had* managed this little affair!

‘Ah!’ she says in a low tone, but sharply enough to

attract attention. Lord Branksmere turns his gaze from the frieze he has not been studying to regard her questioningly. He finds her glance riveted upon the world outside, one hand upraised as though in horror.

‘What is it?’ demands he listlessly.

‘Nothing.’ She makes a movement as though to prevent his coming to the window, and even changes her position somewhat ostentatiously so as to get between him and it.

‘What horrible secret does the night hold that you would seek to hide from me?’ asks he, with a smile. ‘Let me share it with you.’ He comes nearer, but laying her hand upon his arm she holds him back.

‘Warnings, I have learned, are thrown away upon you,’ she says with slow meaning. ‘Why then should you seek to make yourself uncomfortable?’

Something in her tone enlightens him.

‘Stand back,’ he says curtly. And as she still affects a determination not to stir, he puts her away with one hand. Poor soul, his touch even thus gained is sweet to her!

Going to the window, Branksmere gazes out into the gloom beyond, that can hardly be called darkness. Night is indeed made glorious by a moonlight, brilliant, clear and calm. Against the background of giant firs—in the very centre of the lawn—two figures stand out prominent.

‘You know I warned you,’ whispers Madame in his ear, creeping close to him and laying a hand upon his arm.

Something in his face unnerves her and renders her tone tremulous. He shakes her off as though she were a viper.

‘Leave me!’ he says between his teeth, addressing her, but never removing his gaze from the two forms advancing towards him across the dewy lawn.

For a moment Madame regards him strangely. There is no rancour in her glance, there is nothing indeed but a sudden despair. Is *this* to be the end of it all? Has Staines, her own common sense, lied to her? Is this woman, this soulless creature who is incapable of appreciating him, the possessor of his heart? Until this instant she had disbelieved it, but *now*—with that expression in his eyes! She had dreamed strange dreams of a divorce—a separation—a time when she, whose whole soul is in his keeping, might have stolen into his heart. But swift as a flash all hope has died within her. The wages for which she had so toiled will never now be hers. And yet, great Heavens! how she has loved this

man; how she has admired the staunchness, the nobility of him; the strength that has enabled him to risk his chance of happiness, all for the sake of saving the honour of another! A sense of age, of weakness, oppresses her as she steals slowly from the room.

Branksmere has not noticed her departure, he is still gazing from the window.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Where there is mystery, it is generally supposed that there must also be evil.

.

MURIEL had noticed the abrupt going of Madame. A curious smile full of bitterness rises to her lips.

‘A precaution,’ she mutters to herself, ‘taken too late.’

Staines has, perhaps, taken more notice of the presence of Lord Branksmere.

‘Shall I come with you any farther?’ he asks in a careful tone, that unfortunately misrepresents itself to her.

‘Why not?’ she answers coldly, a touch of reckless defiance in her voice. If a while ago it had occurred to her that it would be well to give him a word of dismissal before reaching the house, now she decides haughtily within herself that that word she will not speak. Of course Staines is afraid for *her*, but she will show him that she fears no man, least of all Branksmere.

‘As you will,’ says Staines, with a rather overdone assumption of alacrity.

They have gained the balcony steps by this time. Bridgman has gone round the house to enter by another way, and Muriel mounts the steps with a certain buoyancy in her step, a sort of devilry of carelessness that surprises even herself, and that her companion is far from sharing. This touch of light excitement clings to her until she finds herself face to face with Branksmere, who, as she steps into the drawing-room, comes forward as if to receive her.

But it is not she he receives after all. His eyes, black with passion, have gone past her to where in the semi-darkness the shrinking form of Staines may be seen. There is

something about the gallant captain's face at this instant that suggests the idea that he believes his last—or at all events his second last—moment has come!

'We have had enough of this, I think,' says Branksmere, in a dull, terrible tone, striding forward. Muriel would have stopped him, but he puts her aside as though she were an infant, and reaching Staines, seizes him by the throat, and lifting him in his powerful grasp, drops him right over the balcony. The thud of his body can be distinctly heard as it gains the ground.

It is all the work of an instant. It seems to kill the venom in Branksmere and to do him good. Whether his enemy is lying writhing in pain with a broken back, or has escaped unhurt, is of equal value to him apparently, as his face is almost calm when he closes the window and turns to confront his wife. If he had expected an outburst of sympathy for the sufferer on her part he is mistaken.

'I fear you have hurt him,' she says coldly.

'I hope so,' deliberately.

'To have degraded him in my eyes you think a fine thing. You forget that at the same time you were degrading me in his, and yours, and mine! So be it; it is your own doing, remember. And after all there was scarcely occasion for such a show of brutality.' Her voice is perfectly even, there is no vehemence, not even the slightest hint at passion in it. 'I met him by accident as I left the Towers, and he very naturally accompanied me here.'

'I should fling you after him if I for a moment doubted the truth of that statement,' responds he, in a tone that proves the demon within him, if scotched for the time being, still rages.

Lady Branksmere, with a superb gesture, full of scorn, sweeps from the room.

Three hours later, worn out by her angry pacing up and down the floor of the empty ball-room, where she knew she would be free of interruption, and where she could think out her wild thoughts alone, Lady Branksmere slowly mounts the stairs that lead to her bedroom. Most of the lamps are extinguished, and only a dull gleam here and there at far distances serves to make the darkness felt. Down below, somewhere far away, a clock chimes the second hour of morning. Through the windows of the corridor along which she is passing a few straggling moonbeams find their way.

Pausing by one of the windows Lady Branksmere throws up the sash, and, leaning out into the night, gazes downwards at the white pavement of the courtyard lying below.

That sad old story of that other Lady Branksmere, who, in years gone by, had found her death upon those cruel stones, comes back to her. Poor soul! A melancholy life, a melancholy death, were hers. Married to the man she hated, forbidden to speak to or see the man she loved. Reckoned by all a guilty thing because——

A hot flush dyes her brow. She clenches her hand and shrinks involuntarily backwards as though to hide away from her very self. She had condemned that poor dead dame. Had looked upon her as a lost creature—a very Jezebel; and now! How is she—Muriel—so much better than her? To what words had she listened to-night? She—a wife!

A shudder passes over her. In this vague, mysterious hour when all the world seems dead, and she and her own heart stand here alone, what excuse dare she plead that judgment be not passed upon her? A cruel fear lays siege to her soul; a horror of what the future may hold for her; a sense of drifting whither she would not go.

All at once the dull lamp that had been burning at the lower end of the corridor goes out, expiring with a melancholy flicker that startles and unnerves her. Once again the vision of that unhappy woman who had been dashed to pieces upon the pavement beneath presents itself. An eerie sensation that suggests the near approach of some impending doom takes possession of her: she is alone in the gloom with only a few ghostly moonbeams to betray the darkness, and the unpleasant knowledge that this corridor is said to be haunted. With an effort to subdue her foolish weakness she is about to proceed on her way, when a sound comes to her from the Dowager's apartments beyond that freezes the blood in her veins.

It is the same awful cry that she had heard once before. A long, low, creeping cry, replete with anguish, and scarcely human. Not the wail of an old woman. Even at this terrible moment Lady Branksmere wonders inwardly how she could ever have thought it had fallen from the Dowager's lips. It is clear, strong, piercing; but unearthly!

Her breath stops short. She had been toying with a bracelet on her way up the stairs, and now it falls from her nervous grasp and rolls along the polished floor with a little rasping noise.

To her heated imagination it seems as though this rolling will never cease. A silence as terrible as the cry itself had followed upon it; as suddenly as it rose it had died. Had a cloth been laid upon the screaming lips, or a heavy door closed to deaden the sound?

Again the sacred stillness of the night is desecrated, again an appalling sound rings through the corridor. But now the wail has turned to shrieking laughter, to a mirth that makes the blood grow cold, and compels one's heart to stand still. Is there *madness* in it?

Muriel, half wild with terror, rushes to her own room, and closing the door with trembling fingers that will scarcely obey her meaning, locks it firmly. Great Heaven! what mystery dwells within this dreadful house? Her face is bloodless; her hands cold; she is shivering in every limb. Must she dwell for ever, then, in terror? A longing to escape gives her the strength to walk wildly up and down her room, as some poor animal might do within its detested cage. It is too late to return to the Towers; already it is two hours after midnight, and to free one's self from this terrible atmosphere for only a few hours, of what avail is it? But to get away for ever—for ever—for ever!

She is still trembling with excitement; she has fallen into a chair, and her hands are hanging loosely by her side. Her breath is coming in short, fitful gasps. Yes; to go *for ever*. To leave all this, and the anger, and the impotent protesting behind her! What was it that Staines had said?

She grows even whiter, and leans back heavily in her chair. Yes, she remembers! Never had his wooing been so impassioned even in the old days. It had not lain so much in speech as in voice and eyes; and yet—*What is it?* She pushes back the hair from her hot forehead, and springing to her feet gazes at herself intently in the huge mirror let into the wall that reaches from floor to ceiling: the white-set face! but where is the love in it that should shine, though it be guiltily? What has come to her? Has she, indeed, lost all desire for everything earthly or heavenly? Can she no longer love or hate? Is her soul dead within her?

My face is foul with weeping,
And on my eyelids is the shadow of death.
Mine eye also is dim by reason of sorrow.

But to go with him! To quit this cruel life for one where—

She shudders violently and presses her palms together. Yet surely no other life could be more cruel! And then there would be love! That he loves her seems beyond all doubt. She would no longer have to enact the rôle of the neglected, forsaken wife, the woman cast aside and abandoned. She lifts her hand to wipe the moisture from her brow! To go—to leave it all. To wake in some other clime free from the insulting chains that so long have galled her! To wake—a *dishonoured* woman! A false wife! A meretricious thing with garments defiled, from whom all other women, good and happy, will for ever shrink with righteous disdain. Sweet Heaven; NO!

She puts up her hand as if to ward from her some intolerable thought. The drops rise and cling to her forehead. Her pulse deadens. She stoops forward. She feels that she is falling—falling——!

Dropping upon her knees she clasps her forehead close.

‘A new and contrite heart,’ for this she prays.

And with prayer comes peace and a desire for good. She rises presently with the longing for repentance strong upon her, to find her husband, to confess all to him, to ask from him a confession in return (a confession she swears to herself she will condone, whatever it may be, if given to her openly and honestly) is her new-born desire. Life has for ever lost its sweetness for her. Hope, bright Vanadis, that most desirable of all the goddesses of Olympus, has given her up long since; but still some poor return may be hers.

To wait for the morning with all these wild, grievous thoughts surging within her seems impossible. She must go now. If asleep she can wake him. She *must* go.

She steals to the door, opens it, and in spite of her fear creeps along towards her husband’s room. Now, as she nears the hanging curtains that cut off the haunted rooms inhabited by Madame von Thirsk, from the rest of the house, she trembles visibly and pauses. Can she pass them?

Even as she hesitates the heavy curtain is swung aside, and into the moonlight that now has grown broad and full, and straight from Madame’s apartments, emerge the figures of Thekla von Thirsk and—Lord Branksmere!

Muriel, putting out both her hands behind her, steals backwards, and coming softly against a wall leans against it thankfully, and with the faintness of death upon her waits for what may come.

Madame's face is strangely pale and careworn. She looks as one who has just undergone a heavy trial. Her eyes are still wide and wet with the traces of bitter tears just shed. She is speaking, and the words are falling from her hurriedly, as from one who is filled with grief.

'The past is over and done,' she is saying, 'and why should I *now* be betrayed? I have your oath. Branksmere—*your oath*—remember that.' She is deeply agitated.

'If you will keep me to it,' replies he moodily, his eyes fixed upon the ground.

'I do hold you.' Her voice has grown strong again. 'It is but a small thing to you, perhaps, but to me it means honour, all! Have you forgotten *everything*, that you thus speak lightly of betrayal? Does it not concern you as much as me?'

'As much, indeed.' His voice is low, and as he speaks a sigh escapes him.

'Ah! you still acknowledge *that*. The love, then, that belongs to those old days is not yet slain? That is well! Why should the work of years be undone to gratify the cold fancy of an unloving girl?'

An inexplicable change darkens Branksmere's face.

'She has reason to be cold,' he says with a sort of subdued passion. 'This secrecy that she so resents; this melancholy tie that binds us—you and me—all tend to render her unloving.'

'Again you waver,' murmurs Madame, moving closer to him.

'No.'

'You will be staunch?' She lays her hand upon his arm and her voice takes a low, seductive tone; 'you will be *true*? It means life to me, Branksmere, and you owe me much. You have sworn to me already, but I would have you say again that you will never be false to your old allegiance.'

'I shall not be false.'

'The old love, then, still lives?'

'It lives—always.'

'Oh, Branksmere!' cries Madame in a low voice, that to the silent listener seems filled with passion.

Light and swift as a shadow Muriel moves away from them, back to the room she has just quitted. All the soft penitence is gone from her face. Her mouth is stern. Her eyes are all ablaze with a fire that hate has lit. She does not kneel

this time. No prayer rises to her lips. She flings wide the casement as though athirst for air, and as the dawn comes slowly up and the first cold breath of morn salutes her brow, her final resolve is formed!

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CHAPTER XL.

He is my bane, I cannot bear him,
One heaven and earth can never hold us both.

.

'It's the very deuce of a thing,' says Mr. Daryl ruefully.

'Well, it's just that,' acquiesces his wife with the utmost agreeability. 'But why she can't tug on with that poor Branksmere is a puzzle to me.'

'You know why she doesn't,' puts in Dick with a frown. '*She* has explained it to you clearly enough, and you know also that that evening he was here with her *he* failed to explain anything.'

'Still, I believe there is some mistake somewhere. There is a touch of strength about Branksmere's face that precludes the idea of falseness.'

'Well, however it goes, it's the dickens of a nuisance,' says Billy again, running his fingers with vague irritability through his hair. It is close on eleven o'clock, and the sweetness and light that may be derived from a sound slumber commend themselves to him. 'Something ought to be done, I suppose, eh?' His tone is deplorably wanting in vigour. There is even a suspicious ring in it that might lead the hearers to suspect him of being only ambitious of doing nothing!

'Certainly, and at once,' replies Dick severely.

'Oh! not at once,' remonstrates Meg weakly. 'One should think.'

'No, certainly not *at once*.' Billy grasps at this eagerly. 'And to think; to think *hard* is in my opinion essential.'

'I don't agree with you; not a moment should be lost,' persists Dick, the implacable. 'He is treating her barbarously, and she is our sister. If *we* do not stand to her, who will? You are the eldest, Billy. If I were you I should make a move.'

'There you are utterly out of it,' returns Billy dejectedly. 'If such a remarkable event could occur that you should become *me*, I beg to assure you you wouldn't stir a peg. To make a move is the very last thing in the world I want to do, unless it be towards bed. You may think, my good boy, that it is a simple thing to walk up to a fellow who has the misfortune to be one's brother-in-law, and who up to this has seemed to you to be a very decent sort of fellow, and tell him in blank verse that he is a da—— Yes, yes, my dear girl, *of course*! One should never go to extremes in one's language, that I know; and after all I didn't say it, did I?'

'Well, I guess you did what you could for it,' says Mrs. Billy.

'After all it seems a pity that Muriel married poor George,' murmurs Angelica dreamily. 'Perhaps it would have all turned out better if she had married her first love, Captain Staines.'

'Oh, no!' The words break from Mrs. Billy's lips as if against her will. Her voice is full of horror, and she puts out one hand impulsively, as though to ward off some danger. Everyone looks a little surprised; her husband in a sleepy, half-amused fashion.

'Why, what has that blonde Apollo done to you?' he asks lazily, 'that you should break into such violent language. Your behaviour is far worse than mine was—*going to be*—a few moments ago.'

Mrs. Billy's laugh is perfectly natural as she turns to him.

'Don't like his face,' she says. 'I hate those starved-looking men. One never can be sure, of course, but I don't think she would have been happy with him.'

'Happier than with a man who has so grossly insulted her,' returns Dick gloomily.

'As to that, Muriel was always rather fanciful. We ourselves used to find her a little difficult,' puts in Peter. 'And Branksmere certainly was awfully in love with her when they were married, whatever he may be now. He insisted upon making the most splendid settlements'—turning to Mrs. Daryl—'and made her a present of 20,000*l.* upon their wedding day, so that she might feel herself independent of him. Of course, if that story about Madame von Thirsk is true, he is the greatest scoundrel I have heard of, but is it? She is such

a nice little woman,' says Peter sentimentally, to whom all nice little women are dear.

'I'm sure I don't see how it is all to end?' says Margery despairingly. 'As for Madame, though I think she is like a cat, still I think she is, in some ways, a good soul, and devoted to that dreadful old mummy upstairs. That is why Branksmere is so attached to her, though Muriel refuses to see it.'

'Things grow worse between them every day.'

'And that's a fact,' says Tommy Paulyn, sauntering in from the shrubberies, where he has been amusing himself with the inevitable cigarette, and a pea-shooter meant for the diversion of any prowling cat. 'Do I give it the correct twang, Mrs. Billy?—to see those two glowering at each other is enough to upset the nerves of anyone as delicate as I am. It's a mistake, too,' continues Tommy, with a languishing air. 'It gives us, the outsiders, a distaste for matrimony.'

'I don't see where the mistake comes in there,' says Angelica scornfully.

'Don't you? How dense you grow, Angelica. Can't you see that I, as a Lord of the Creation, being disheartened by such goings on and afraid to cast myself at the feet of—let me say, for example—you, an excellent chance is lost to the girls of England for ever?'

'Pshaw!' says the third Miss Daryl.

'By all means, old girl. Anything you wish,' responds Mr. Paulyn amiably; 'your remarks, if short, are always to the point. I didn't quite catch the last, but I feel it was worthy of you. No affectation about *your* style; no pretence at an unhealthy elegance. Indeed, there is an absence of starch about you generally that is very refreshing.'

'If you *must* talk so much, it is a pity you can't do it in decent English.'

'Do you mean to insinuate that my English is *indecent*? Oh! fie, Angelica; you hurt me very much; I, who have always so prided myself upon my—— You ask my opinion, Mrs. Billy? Oh! ah! yes, to be sure. It is exactly the same as yours, I assure you.'

'Tommy! You have not been listening,' declares Mr. Daryl sternly. 'Don't mind him, Willie,' to his wife.

'I give you my word. I really, you know, wouldn't for anything——' begins Tommy, mumbling hopelessly, and squeezing energetically a bunch of leaves he has brought indoors with him.

'It doesn't matter at all. The thing now is to know what is to be done with Muriel. I'm afraid she imagines a good deal.'

'What she wants,' declares Mr. Daryl, with the air of a discoverer, 'is a shock! A rattling good *shock*! She is too one-sided an observer, too narrow, too self-conscious; and a shock of some sort would rouse her from her absurd fancies and bring her to her senses.'

'A shock, they say, is good for most people,' answers his wife doubtfully; 'but then, who is to administer it?'

'Can I be of any use?' asks Mr. Paulyn earnestly, and, it must be allowed, with the very purest purpose—if for this time only. As he speaks he extends his arm and flings into the fire (the night is cold) the leaves he holds. They are laurel leaves, and at once go off with a resounding succession of sharp bangs that would have put a small artillery corps to shame. As if with one consent they all jump! Margery, indeed, gives way to a faint shriek. The untimely interruption has occurred at a most unhappy moment, and rouses angry feelings in their breasts. Indeed, I need hardly say that everyone is extremely indignant.

'Is that what you call a shock? If you can't help us, Thomas, in our misery, at least have the goodness to refrain from your eternal practical jokes,' says Margery sternly.

Mr. Daryl, whom time and circumstance should have sobered, has, I regret to say, subsided into uncontrollable laughter and an easy-chair, behind a convenient screen. He is therefore unequal to the occasion.

'It wasn't a joke,' protests the Hon. Tommy. 'At least not on my part. Who'd have thought a few innocent-looking green, *very green*, leaves would have made such a row?'

Here another of them that had up to this escaped the blaze is now caught by it and explodes noisily.

'Now, Tommy, there! You're at it again. If nobody else speaks to you about it I will,' cries Angelica wrathfully, who is plainly under the impression that up to this everyone else has been absurdly mild about it.

'Do you mean to say *that* was my fault?' demands Tommy, in a highly indignant tone. 'Why didn't it go off at first, I'd like to know, instead of meanly dodging about so as to get me into deeper disgrace? You saw it all, Mrs. Billy'—appealing to her hopefully, as most people would—

'and you will admit that that last confounded thing went off by itself. Eh! now. Didn't it?'

But Mrs. Billy has disappeared behind her handkerchief.

'There, now, you've made her cry. I hope you are satisfied now!' says Angelica vindictively. 'You have simply frightened her out of her life. And at such a time, too,' regarding him reproachfully, 'to play jokes!'

'It *wasn't* a joke, I tell you!' almost roars the dismayed Tommy. 'It's no joke *at all*! And I never knew those vile leaves were surcharged with gunpowder or I wouldn't have touched 'em. I say, Mrs. Billy, don't go on like that, you know. Eh? Eh? I'm real sorry, you know!'

A little gasp escapes Mrs. Billy; she lets the handkerchief fall and gives way to wild merriment.

'It was so opportune, so deliciously *à propos*,' she exclaims. 'But one shouldn't laugh when one has so serious a subject on hand,' growing grave again. 'Poor Muriel! I am so grieved about her.'

'It all comes of marrying a man without loving him,' says Margery.

'And I don't believe she cared a brass farthing for Branksmere,' supplements Peter.

'Well,' declares Mr. Daryl, who has deserted the arm-chair, and is once again as solemn as anyone can desire, and considerably more drowsy, 'if people will commit that sort of moral suicide they must expect a disastrous result. What will you have?' He shrugs his shoulders as though in contempt of that sort of people.

'A brandy and soda, thanks,' says Mr. Paulyn abstractedly, who has mistaken the meaning of the last remark and the tone of the conversation generally. Everyone laughs except Mr. Daryl, who remains preternaturally grave, and regards the Hon. Tommy with a countenance expressive of the deepest admiration.

'Thomas, thou hast said it!' he remarks at last. 'This Parliament,' addressing his wife, 'is prorogued indefinitely. May the gods grant our next meeting may be a merrier one. Come with me, "true Thomas," to the billiard-room, where probably that gracious mixture of which you spoke is awaiting us. Peter—Dick, be in attendance.'

They all disappear. The boys with Billy, Angelica to her bed. Margery going up to Mrs. Billy lays her hand upon her shoulders.

'What do you know of Captain Staines?' she asks slowly.

'Not much,' returns Mrs. Daryl, returning her gaze in full. 'And yet a great deal.'

'You have met him before? In some other part of your life? Ah! I could see it. You know of——'

'Nothing to his good!' calmly. 'Yes, I knew him—in the old days.'

'You—you loved him?'

'Certainly not,' with healthy emphasis.

'He loved you?'

Mrs. Billy smiles.

'My dear girl. You, who know the man, to ask such a question! Could he love anything beyond himself and his own interests?'

'See here,' says Margery, growing pale, but not removing her earnest gaze from the face before her, nor her grasp from her shoulders, 'you have kept secret your knowledge of him all this time. Why?'

'Secret? Does one mention every casual acquaintance?'

'He was no casual acquaintance. Some motive kept you silent. Speak, Willie! Tell me what you know of him!'

'Do you, then, suspect me of an intrigue with him?' asks the other gravely.

'That question is unworthy of you! No. I ask for——' she draws her breath sharply, and her lips grow white—'Muriel's sake! If you know anything that might—— The idea is cruel, mean, but I would do anything to break the bond of affected friendship that exists between them. Willie, if you know *anything* to his disadvantage say it. Do not hesitate; save her at all risks! What is he to us that you should refrain from speech that may help to clear her eyes? Yesterday I met them again, she and that bad man, down in the little dell we used to call "Love's Retreat," because he and she used to walk there every day when we thought she meant to marry him. Oh, if one only knew of something that would turn her heart against him!'

'I don't believe she in the least cares for him,' says Mrs. Daryl, looking at the ground.

'And yet——'

'And yet to escape her present life she may commit any folly. I understand her as well as you do. You would hear what I know of Staines? Hear it, then. He was obliged to leave Brussels whilst I was there in rather an uncomfortable

hurry. They had thrown him out of the club window the night before because of his being a little too clever about his cards.'

'That is very bad,' says Margery. 'But there is something more. All that is outside your *own* experience of him. And I would have that.'

'Would you?'

Mrs. Billy regards her intently.

'It is, as I told you, a trivial affair—an everyday occurrence, probably,' with a rather bitter intonation, 'hardly worth so much reticence on my part. As you are so persistent, listen then. Once Captain Staines did me the honour to ask me to run away with him. To give up name and fame for him! To accept *shame* for him! I was only a poor dependent then, to whom an insult might safely be offered. The General and his money were not thought of. It was really being good-natured to ask a poor, overworked, tired, miserable little girl to leave her life of slavery for—Pshaw!' cried Mrs. Billy, flinging up her head. 'Why should I at this hour feel so keenly the treatment of a man so utterly base, so unworthy of any thought?'

'My poor heart!' says Margery, with deepest commiseration and self-reproach. 'I should not have pressed the question.' She lifts Mrs. Daryl's hands and kisses them softly one after the other. Then—'Does Billy know?'

'How could I tell him? No. A thousand times, no! What a disgrace; a horror! It was such a shameful thing,' cries Mrs. Billy, and then all at once her self-possession deserts her, and she bursts into a storm of tears. 'Oh! that I could requite that man,' she whispers sobbingly through her set teeth, 'that I could find myself once face to face with him with the *necessity* to speak the truth full upon me, and the knowledge that my betrayal would be—*his ruin*.'

Who would have thought all this passion was in the *débonnaire* little creature now encircled by Margery's arms?—Margery, to whom she clings because some innate knowledge satisfies her that the girl on just such another occasion would feel as she does—just so true a friend, just so true an enemy, just as revengeful.

Her tears are dried as quickly as they fall. She shakes her pretty hair and looks up at Margery. A heavy sigh escapes her.

'There! I'm glad I've told someone,' she says, 'though

I just wish it had been Billy, not you. However, I shall tell him some day, when Staines is well out of the way. That will be soon.'

Margery shudders, some inward fear renders her for the moment cold.

'No, my dear, nothing of *that* sort. Not while I'm here. I'll prevent it all I can,' says Mrs. Billy. 'Don't make yourself uncomfortable before you must.'

'If Muriel only knew——'

'She shall know all in good time. I shall so far sacrifice myself, and at the same time satisfy my honour. And now to bed. Keep my secret, Meg, until——'

'For ever,' says Meg.

Half an hour later, Mr. Daryl, having effected his escape from the other occupants of the billiard-room, enters his own apartment to find his wife awaiting him, standing by the window. As she turns to receive him, there is no trace of her late emotion about her. Her face is as bright as ever, the customary smile with which she always greets him as sweet.

'Life is fatiguing,' says Mr. Daryl, sinking with a sleepy sigh into the nearest lounging chair, 'especially the part of it that has to do with one's sisters. Muriel will turn me grey even before you do, and Margery is nearly as bad. She turns up her nose at every fellow she meets; and as for Bellew, she is playing old Harry with *him*.'

'I could tell you something about him,' returns his wife mysteriously. 'But I can't; you'd be sure to tell it again and—— No, I can't *indeed*. I've promised.'

'Oh, go on!' says Mr. Daryl, with a criminal disregard for the sacredness of one's word.

'Well,' relenting, *eagerly* relenting 'you are sure you will——'

'Positive.'

'Never?'

'Never!'

'Then I must tell you that last night, as I came suddenly round the large myrtle in the corner of the garden, I found Margery there with Bellew, and he had his arm round her waist, and she didn't seem in the least annoyed. She seemed, indeed, rather—er—comfortable, if anything. She made me promise not to mention it, however, and I did, faithfully.'

'So you did—faithfully!'

‘Well, don’t you think *that* means something?’

‘No, I don’t. I have long ceased to place my faith in such paltry evidence as that. To my certain knowledge Curzon has had his arm round her waist off and on for the last two years without the faintest result. For my own part I begin to think poorly of Bellew. If *I* were to have my arm round a girl’s waist for the five-hundredth part of that time I should——’

‘Billy! I wonder you aren’t ashamed to speak to me in that way.’

‘*Why*, my dear? Would you prefer my addressing that remark to somebody else? I can’t remember that in the old days you saw any very great harm in having my arm round your——’

‘We were talking of Margery,’ interrupts she severely. ‘Let us keep to some respectable subject.’

‘By all means. I should hate to wander into the paths of vice. As to Margery, perhaps she means to marry Tommy.’

‘Tommy! Nonsense! Who would marry Tommy? He is just one of the nicest people I know, but as to marriage! why, he isn’t in it at all. I could almost find it in my heart to love him; but to go to the altar with him, that is a different thing.’

‘Mrs. Daryl, permit me to say that I object to that speech,’ puts in Billy, in a tone descriptive of marital sternness struggling with sleep.

‘I am alluding to Margery,’ vaguely. ‘The idea of your thinking she would accept Tommy. Who would marry such an inconsequent person? I know *I* wouldn’t.’

‘Couldn’t!’ murmurs Mr. Daryl drowsily. He has managed by this time to get out of his coat, no more, and is now plainly on the verge of a refreshing slumber. A gentle somnolence has caught him. To even a careless observer it might occur that he had made up his mind to spend the remainder of the night in the arm-chair, his shirt, waistcoat, and the rest of it. ‘Bigamy is not tolerated in this slow old country.’

‘A good thing, too,’ declares Mrs. Billy with warmth. ‘What is your mind running on now? A harem?’

‘Oh, no, my love! Oh, fie!’ breathes Mr. Daryl, with a gleam of consciousness. There is, however, a frivolity about his horror that strikes upon his wife’s ear.

‘There are certain failings about you, Billy, that ought to be corrected,’ she is beginning with emphasis, when a sound

comes to her that puts to flight all sensations save that of wrath. It is a mild, harmonious snore that breaks from Mr. Daryl's Roman nose, with an honest heartiness that admits of no misconception.

'I do believe you are asleep!' cries his wife, with accentuated indignation. She draws closer to him to make sure of the hateful fact, and as she does so a ready vengeance holds out its arms to her. Billy's barber had inadvertently forgotten to clip off one small lock just behind his ear. This had been to Billy's wife a sore grievance for a week past; now it is a boon! She seizes upon it, she draws it briskly upwards. With a wild shriek Mr. Daryl is brought back to every-day life, and beats a retreat to his dressing-room.

CHAPTER XLI.

Where no hope is left, is left no fear.

Alas! I lose myself,
'Tis pathless, dark, and barren all to me.

MURIEL's fatal resolution once formed she hastens the completion of it. With a soul full of returning grace she had re-entered the corridor that night; with a soul void of all belief and hope she left it. When next Staines met her—and she actually laid plain the way for him—she received his half-veiled aspirations in so friendly a spirit that he was emboldened to place before her the plans he had for so long a time framed. She acquiesced in all of them; but so coldly, so indifferently, that he was both puzzled and piqued by her manner.

To him, departure from this part of the world was imperative: steeped to his very eyes in debt, both here and in town, nothing is left him but an immediate and secret disappearance from the land of his duns. To live abroad on that thousand a year so considerably bestowed upon Lady Branksmere by her husband is the little game that for some time has presented itself to him as being worthy of notice. The thought of leaving England with Lady Branksmere (who is the most desirable woman in the world to him), *and* this sum, seems good in his eyes, and her yielding, however coldly accorded, a success.

It is a week later, and a cold, dull evening, rain-washed and dreary. 'A common greyness silvers everything.' No sight of moon is possible, and through all the air there is a threatening of thunder. The clouds hang low, and out of them the mountains loom, gloomy and grand. Rising through the sullen mist their peaks rise upward like spires, as if seeking for freedom. Between them the sky shines red as fire, An appalling fire, weird and horrible, that clings to one's memory as though it were a part of Dante's *Inferno*!

And now the rain comes tumbling down: it descends in torrents; the whole face of the earth is made green by it.

The dykes are filled, and with a roaring sound,
The rising rivers float the nether ground.

Hardly heeding the extraordinary blackness of the growing night, Lady Branksmere, with a travelling cloak thrown across her arm, turns the handle of her husband's private room and enters it, to find him seated at a table at the other end.

'It is a mistake to waste words in explanation,' she says. 'Hear me once for all. I leave this house to-night, for ever.'

'Ah!' says Branksmere. He rises to his feet and pushes his papers slowly from him. Just so much time it takes him to recover himself. 'And with whom?' he asks, looking directly at her. His tone is calm.

'Captain Staines,' returns she, as calmly. If she had expected to triumph in his burst of rage on hearing this answer she is disappointed. Branksmere's face remains impassive.

'May I ask the reason of this sudden determination?' he asks presently.

'I think,' coldly, 'you hardly need. I have no time to waste.'

'In *such* mad haste to be gone? Even so, I must press you for an answer, if only that I may be able to give it to my questioners hereafter.'

'Say that the atmosphere of the place proved too much for me. I have no appetite for the mysterious, and the sounds that reach one's ear at midnight in this house are far from reassuring.' She looks at him keenly as she fires this shaft, but if a change passes over his face it is so fleeting that she scarcely catches it. 'Say I am unreasonable—fanciful, if you will—*anything*,' slowly, 'but the truth. *That* is too shameful! Say—I don't care what you say,' she ends abruptly.

'I can readily believe it. A woman bent on taking such a step as yours would naturally be indifferent to public opinion. And so—this is to be the end of it?'

'I hope so. So far as you and I are concerned.'

'Your chief desire is to escape from me?'

'And—*her*!'

'Pshaw! let us keep to sense. Your old affection for this man has induced you to leave me? I would at least hear you say so.'

'That you might feel your own conscience the lighter? Cease from taunts, Branksmere, and from hypocrisy, too. You know you will be as glad to be rid of me as I shall be to know that I have looked my last on you!' The wild bitterness of her tone renders him silent. 'A truce to anger,' she cries presently, with a great impatience, 'I leave you because life here is no longer bearable.'

'You leave me—to join your lover.'

'Is that so?' A slow smile curls her lip. 'If it will make you any the happier leave it so.'

'If that were not the case surely matters might have been more respectably arranged,' returns he with a shrug. 'Did it never suggest itself to you that you might have separated yourself from me in a more decent fashion? You might have gone alone.'

'It is too late now for suggestions.' Her tone is dull, and in a weary way she taps the ends of her taper fingers against the table near her. 'I have given him my promise.'

'Once you made me a promise!' He pauses here, but her tired face showing no signs of relenting, he refuses to continue his subject. 'Did it never strike you that I might prevent this mad act of yours?'

'And serve me as that ancient dame of your house was served, who died rather than live a prisoner? Well,' with a scornful glance, 'even though you should treat me so, I should not die. Do not,' with a little contemptuous laugh, 'hope for *that*. I should only learn to wait, and then all things would come to me. But I am safe from you. To seek to detain me is the last thing that would enter into your head.'

'The very last. You speak truly there.'

'You acknowledge something; why not acknowledge all?' asks she, lifting to his a face that is passion pale. 'Your *tendresse* for Madame—all.'

'I almost wish I could. Then, at least, there might be a

chance of gaining absolution ; but as it stands, you see,' coldly, 'there is nothing to confess.'

'You lie to the last,' she says. 'And yet even to gain your wife you refused to let *her* go.'

'That would not have gained me my wife. And yet——' He looks at her strangely with a face grown suddenly white. 'If I were now to prove false to my friendship and gratitude to my grandmother's faithful friend——'

'The time is past for all that,' interrupts she steadily. 'You would now do for the sake of your own good name what you would not do for me. I thank you ; but I will not accept the sacrifice. It is,' bitterly, 'too great.'

'What charge do you bring against me ?'

'Many and many a one.'

'And yet I hold myself blameless.'

'Have a care, Branksmere ! The world may be cheated by you, but I cannot.'

'You give the world too much credit, it seems to me. You pay it too rich a compliment. Its innocence is hardly to be relied upon. You think yourself far cleverer than it, yet the world, you should remember, has a thousand eyes—you but two. Yet it has not condemned me.'

'It is my privilege as a wife,' says she slowly, 'to know you more intimately than most.'

'A wife ! I have no wife !' There is a world of contemptuous anger in his voice. His eyes flash ; for the moment he looks as though he could willingly annihilate her. 'My accusation !' he demands in a tone that admits of no refusal.

'*That woman,*' cries she, throwing wide her arms, and drawing up her beautiful figure to its full height. 'Do you deem me a fool, or blind ? *She* is your friend, not I. She has rooms to which I have no access—I—in my own house ! but where *you* are made welcome.'

'If you must have an answer again to that, I swear to you I never saw her rooms in my life.'

'You swear that !' With her eyes still fixed on his she recoils from him a step or two, as if in abhorrence. 'You *swear* it !' she says.

'From my soul I do. Nay, hear me. That night—you saw me in the corridor with—her—and——'

'How do you know that ?'

'By this.' Opening a drawer, he holds out to her the bracelet she had dropped there when her terror at that un-

earthly scream had numbed her nerves. 'You accuse me of the worst; but if you had only known why——'

'The time is over for explanations,' exclaims she hastily, waving aside his words by a gesture of the hand.

Silence falls between them after this, a lengthened silence, broken at last by him.

'When do you go?' asks he abruptly.

'Now.'

'Staines is in waiting?'

'Yes.'

'I wonder you aren't afraid of my murdering him,' says he casually, as it were, glancing at her with a half indifferent air.

'*Pas si bête*,' returns she with an insolent lifting of her shoulders. 'You know your own good better than that.'

'You have probably made others aware of this move?' As Branksmere asks this question he regards her keenly.

'No. You alone know of it.'

'It was extremely kind of you to give me such timely warning. It takes away a good deal from the awkwardness of a vulgar discovery. I am sincerely obliged to you; and now one other word before we part. Do you think you will be happy with this—Staines?' He asks this question in his coldest and most sneering manner, as though propounding an ordinary question.

'I don't know. Is there such a thing as happiness?' asks she in turn, lifting to his her great sombre, mournful eyes. 'At least he loves me. I shall have love—the one thing hitherto denied me.'

A curious gleam comes into Branksmere's eyes. For a moment he looks as though some impassioned word must pass his lips, but as suddenly as the longing came it went. He subdues himself, and as if struck by the absurdity of the impulse he has killed, he breaks into a low discordant laugh—a laugh short-lived, but one so strange that she, half startled, looks at him.

'You are merry, sir,' she says gravely.

'Why should I not be? If nothing else, at least grant me a sense of humour. Surely the situation is full of it! It is perhaps the first time on record that Madame has had the courtesy to inform Monsieur of her intention to dishonour him.'

'You are wrong,' indifferently. 'I know of at least one similar case. I knew the woman who so acted.'

'You *knew* her?' There is a cruelty in the emphasis used. Muriel's lips whiten.

'She passed out of my old life,' she answers coldly.

'And into your new one! In all human probability you will meet her again shortly. I congratulate you on your friends,' with a low bow.

'And I you on yours,' meaningly.

'This last friend, to whom we are indebted for the evening's conversation; you are aware, perhaps, that he is penniless?'

'I haven't heard it,' listlessly. 'But even if it is true, it will not distress me. I would welcome poverty—anything—to escape the life I am now leading.'

'You purpose leading another where money will be no object, or at least where very little will suffice? May I ask if you intend living with—your friend—on your jointure?'

'Certainly not,' flushing hotly. 'That I formally resign now, at once and for ever. And I think, my lord,' drawing up her figure with a superb gesture of injured pride, 'you will do me the justice to remember that up to this I have spent only just so little of it as helped me to clothe myself as the mistress of your house should be clothed. I used your money, not for my own good, but for yours.'

'Does—your friend—know you are determined to accept nothing at my hands for the future?'

'No.'

'You have not mentioned the subject to him?'

'No. There was no necessity.'

'Ah!' says Branksmere. 'I think, however, I would have mentioned it had I been you!' An unpleasant smile darkens his face. 'The money is yours, remember,' he says presently. 'I have no smallest claim to it. If you decline to use it, it will in course of time lapse to the Crown.'

'That doesn't concern me; I have no further interest in it.'

'And he—your friend—really knows nothing of this?'

'Why should he?' haughtily.

'Ah! That is just it. Why indeed? No doubt love, the almighty, will be more to him than—— Did I understand you to say you leave this house to-night?'

'Yes.'

'Will you permit me to order one of the carriages for you? or has your friend arranged for all?'

'You are pleased to be insolent, sir, but——'

'The night is cold : let me at least'—pouring out a glass of wine—'induce you to take this before encountering the chilly air.'

'Thank you, no. I shall never again, I hope, touch anything in this house.' She moves towards the door. Branksmere coming from the other side of the table and following her, she turns upon him an interrogative glance.

'You will permit me to see you as far as the wicket gate—that is the shortest way to the road,' he says, answering her unspoken question. 'The night is dark and very cold.'

'But no farther,' hastily.

'If you forbid it, certainly not. I presume you are taking the first step alone?'

'Why, no. As it happens, you are leading me in it.' A short untuneful laugh parts her lips.

'Captain Staines is not to meet you here?'

'Why should he meet me here?' she answers evasively, something in his tone, that rings through the remarkable calmness of it, raising a feeling of mistrust in her bosom. They have reached the large hall by this time, and are now close to the door.

'What! no backward glance?' says Branksmere, with a sneering gaiety. 'The last look is an orthodox performance. The staircase, they tell me, is of the very purest Early English type, and well worth remembrance.'

'There is no need for a last glance. I shall remember this house, believe me, to my dying day.'

'The house is much in your debt; you have honoured it too highly,' returns Branksmere, with bitter meaning. As he speaks he puts out his hand idly and possesses himself of a heavy hunting whip lying on one of the tables. He weighs it lightly.

'Why are you taking that?' demands she abruptly. With a sort of comfort in her frozen heart she remembers that Staines is to meet her, not at the wicket gate, but at the one lower down, so that a meeting between the two men may be avoided. A moment later she smiles inwardly at her fear; surely the last thing Branksmere would do would be to quarrel with the man who is about to rid him of her for ever.

'I shall probably step round to the kennels when I have seen you safely on your journey.' He accompanies his careless answer with a light laugh. It jars upon her even in this numbed mood of hers. When he has seen her safely gone!

He can already speculate upon the next thing then to be done. Life will go on for him in the old way, the dogs will be caressed, the—— Nay! Life will be a *new* thing for him, a joyous resurrection from the ashes of the hated past where she took part. There is something so thoroughly buoyant in his whole air that a feeling of sickening disgust takes possession of her and weighs her to the earth. Oh that all was over and done, and she dead, and the cruel world forgotten! And yet, alas! how would death avail her? What place can be for such as her beyond the grave?

Why, she has been so little to him, so burdensome a charge, that even a knowledge of the dishonour she is bringing on him, and that will lower him in the eyes of his world, is insufficient to quell within him the sense of gladness, of relief, that has come to him with the certainty that now she is about to pass out of his life for ever.

Her step grows more hurried. Arrived at the wicket gate she stops abruptly.

‘Here we part,’ she says aloud. And even as the words pass her lips she becomes aware of a dark figure standing in the shadow at the other side of the gate. A smothered ejaculation falls from Branksmere. Striding forward, he lays his hand upon the arm of Staines.

CHAPTER XLII.

What hour save this should be thine hour—and mine?

STAINES had evidently mistaken the place of appointment, or else had come this much farther in his anxiety to meet Lady Branksmere. His face blanches perceptibly in the dull moonlight as his eyes meet Branksmere’s, and instinctively he retreats a step or two, and looks to the right and left of him in a hurried fashion, as one might who is meditating flight.

‘Ha, sir! Well met! This is an unexpected pleasure!’ says Branksmere, in a high clear voice, and with a laugh that makes the other’s blood run a little colder in his veins.

There is a dead pause. The heavens above, that a short time ago showed inky black, have now rent their gloomy pall to let a sullen moon shine through. She throws her rays upon the three figures standing in an absolute quiescence as if scarcely

breathing, lighting up Muriel's pale, death-like face, and betraying the strange immobility of her features, and the utter lack of emotion that characterises even her pose. Branksmere's face is set, and around his lips there plays a sardonic smile that Staines, standing as far away from him as he dares, hardly cares to see.

'Your usual urbanity seems to have deserted you. 'What! not a word?' continues Branksmere, breaking through the silence, which is growing strained, and addressing Staines with an air of genial gaiety that the latter appears to regard as oppressive. He retreats still farther into the shade of the laurels as Branksmere deliberately approaches him—as if with a purpose, and with an expression in his eyes of suppressed but deadly fury. Perhaps the scene would now have had a speedy end had not an interruption occurred at this moment that attracts the attention of all three.

Along the path that leads to the wicket gate the sound of running footsteps may be distinctly heard, and presently a small rounded figure comes in sight, and in another instant Mrs. Billy is amongst them. The surprise she evinces at their presence here at this hour is open and immense. Then her glance grows keen, and it takes her but a little time to fully grasp the situation, or at least the headings of it.

'I have accomplished my task half-way. I wanted to see you,' she says lightly, smiling at Muriel. 'Are you really going to Lady Blount's to-morrow? If so, will you come with Margery and me? The night was so pleasant after the heat of the day, that I persuaded Peter to walk out with me. He has gone round to the yard to see one of the men about some dog, but I came straight on this way. Lucky, eh? Peter was just wild with me for wanting to come, as he said rain was in the sky, but now I'm glad I fought it out with him.'

Slowly she had been reading each face, one after the other, and now, as a marked silence greets her little speech, as no answer is vouchsafed to it, she knows her first suspicions were correct. She throws back her hood and turns her gaze anxiously on Branksmere, who is deadly white, and whose eyes are gleaming dangerously. There is something fixed, rigid, about his expression, that warns her if she can do any good she had better do it at once. With Mrs. Billy, knowledge of this kind means action. She turns her attention from Branksmere to Staines, who has grown livid, and going deliberately up to him lays her hand upon his arm.

'You here too!' she cries in her gay, pretty voice; 'the moon is too dull for it, perhaps, but doesn't the whole scene remind you of the old days, when in the gardens at Wiesbaden we used to wander beneath the lindens, you and I? What *tête-à-têtes* those were—what a lover's time! and how you swore to me fidelity, eh? To *me*! Why, it seems like yesterday, so clear it all comes back to me.'

A murderous light rises in Staines' eyes. He would have shaken off her hand, but she keeps that firm little member so tightly clasped upon his sleeve that without actual violence he cannot get away from her. From this he would not have shrunk, but for the knowledge that such violence would only damage his already injured cause.

'Ah! and those other days,' begins she again lightly, but now with a thrill running through her voice—a thrill of angry scorn. 'You remember——'

'*Nothing*,' interrupts he hoarsely, breaking away from her at last. Lady Branksmere has roused from her lethargy, and has drawn a step nearer, her large grey eyes dilated, her breath coming from her heavily.

'*Nothing!*' repeats Mrs. Billy, in a tone even more distinct. She laughs a low mocking laugh that has no music in it. 'How short a lover's vows may be! Let me remind you: let me recall to your mind that never-to-be-forgotten night at Carlsbad when we first met! That sunny morn amongst the flowers at Schlangenbad! that tender evening spent amidst the falling dews! What! has *all* slipped from your treacherous memory?'

Staines makes an effort to speak, but fails.

'At least you will remember that last night on which we met? What! not even that? See now, I think I know something that will refresh your mind. It was on that very night that the unpleasant little affair occurred at the Comte de Grêvecourt's rooms. Perhaps' (airily) 'you can remember *that*? It was a small mistake about an insignificant card, but it appears the Comte was paltry enough to take notice of it. Ah! You *do* recollect it?'

'This is the man, then?' asks Branksmere.

'Why, yes. Seeing him, how can you doubt it? Mark the noble bearing of him,' smiles Mrs. Billy, pointing to Staines, who is cowering before her. 'Is he not the very proper hero for such a romance?'

'You knew this gentleman abroad? You knew him before

you came here?' asks Lord Branksmere, who has noted the gleam in her eyes, and the suppressed indignation that is making the small frame tremble.

'You have guessed it, Branksmere. This *gentleman* and I are well acquainted.' She stops suddenly, as though it is impossible for her to go on, and clenches her hands, and lets a heavy, dry sob break from her. *How* is she to tell it? yet she has promised Margery to save this wilful woman if it be in her power; this woman who is now gazing at her with a ghastly face, and eyes that would pierce her soul! Mrs. Billy nerves herself for a supreme effort; she flings from her all thought of self, and stepping more clearly into the moon-light throws out her hands towards Staines.

'This man,' she says, in a clear thrilling tone, 'once did me the honour to seek to *dishonour* me!'

Her face falls forward into her hands.

'Great Heaven! This is more than one should dare expect of you,' cries Lord Branksmere, in deep agitation.

Mrs. Billy lifts her head and looks at Staines for the last time.

'My husband knows all,' she says, the words coming reluctantly from between her teeth. 'If you would retain your miserable life, escape from this without delay!'

She turns aside as if to leave them; then pauses to lay her shaking hand on Branksmere's sleeve.

'Respect my story!' she entreats him, in a low tone. 'I hardly know why I spoke.'

'I know,' returns he, pressing her hand. In another moment she has glided past them towards the house.

'Is this thing true?' asks Lady Branksmere, going straight up to Staines.

He is silent.

'Speak, man! Answer!' cries she imperiously, with a stamp of her foot.

'N—o,' lies the miserable wretch, with falsehood written in the very swaying and bending of his cowardly frame. What she sees convinces her.

'Liar!' she gasps beneath her breath. Her voice is so low that Staines misses the word, and still resolves to play the winning card if that be possible.

'It is a disgraceful fabrication, got up by that woman to spite me, because I would not respond to her advances,' he declares loudly, his speech growing as low as himself. He

almost shouts his denial—so weak he finds himself in physical courage that he seeks by such means to reassure himself.

‘A very wild story, as you say; no doubt false all through,’ says Branksmere, with a sinister smile. ‘But it was hardly to consider Mrs. Daryl’s wrongs we came here to-night. Let them pass—until—Daryl meets you! What we have now to think of is another affair altogether. By-the-by, *what* has brought you here?’

He is now close to Staines, who makes a movement as though to depart. Lord Branksmere, laying his hand quickly upon his arm, gives him a sudden jerk that brings him to the front in a second.

‘My good fellow, don’t go until we come to an understanding,’ he says. ‘From what I have learned, you are anxious to take charge of Lady Branksmere from this day forth and for ever. Eh? Why, speak up, man; she is here listening to you. She will want a spoken assurance of your faith.’

The gallant Captain, whose knees seem here to cease to be a portion of himself, mutters something in a weak whisper that as yet is unknown.

‘You are modest,’ goes on Branksmere, still with a diabolical calm full upon him. ‘We are waiting for the lover-like statements that will declare your desire to take charge of her you love.’

Goaded by this into speech, Staines makes answer.

‘If you understand anything,’ he says, ‘it is that I desire nothing better than to spend my days ensuring the happiness of—’

‘Quite so!’ interrupts Lord Branksmere curtly. ‘You are, then, prepared to support her? She is without fortune, you know. There was a certain sum settled upon her by me, but that she does not take with her.’

‘You cannot deprive her of it,’ cries Staines hoarsely.

‘True. But it appears she rejects her husband’s gift *with* her husband. Speak for yourself here, madam,’ turning to his wife. ‘Is this so? Is this as you would have it?’

‘It is so,’ returns she icily.

Any little blood that still remains in Staines’ face now flies from it.

‘Well, sir?’ questions Branksmere. ‘We await your word.’

But still the terrible silence continues.

Branksmere bursts into a loud laugh.

'Come, my gay lover! What! not a word? Is the beloved one ungilded less desirable? Come now, one word then, if only for honour's sake. Still silent?—Why, how is this, my lady? Has this lover of yours no tongue? Has passion rendered him dumb? Nay, reassure him then. Tell him he need not fear that poverty with him has any terrors for you!—*Still* silent, man?'

He leans toward Staines, and Staines, as though compelled to it, once more answers him. His speech is rambling; it grows into a puerile mumbling at last. 'He should dread poverty for one beloved! He had not deemed it possible that she would have been so foolish as to——' He breaks down ignominiously.

'The truth! the truth!' cries Branksmere, waving his craven apologies aside. 'What, swindler! can't you even raise your head before her whom you profess to love? Does not affection lend you courage? Where are your thoughts running now, eh? To that little affair in Wiesbaden perhaps, that has damned you with the Junior Army and Navy? Pshaw! how clear it all grows!' Suddenly he changes his tone. 'You have not a penny in the world, eh?'

'Not many, certainly,' confesses Staines recklessly, driven to desperation by this last allusion about Wiesbaden.

'A mendicant, but willing to turn an honest penny,' says Branksmere. 'I know your sort, I think. Your price to clear out of this? Name it?'

'Really,' begins Staines stammering.

'I know all that,' interrupts Branksmere. 'I will take for granted all your surprise at my extraordinary way of treating matters; your astonishment that I should think you capable of, &c. Let us come to the point. What will you take to leave this place to-morrow? A thousand, eh?'

'I don't deny that it would be of use to me,' says Staines in a surly tone.

'I am to understand, then, that you value your affection at one thousand pounds. You agree to this sum?'

'Well—considering——'

'Go on. What am I to consider next?'

'I had not prepared myself for an interview of this sort. I——'

'You have not had sufficient time to think over your bargain. That can't be helped now, I fear. I am in a hurry to get to the close of it. Come, sir. I await your final answer

with impatience.' His fingers close over the riding whip he holds.

'It is all so new to me, you see,' mutters Staines. 'I had not imagined you—er—would have taken it in this way. I should not, of course, like to drag Lady Branksmere into a life of pov——'

'If you mention Lady Branksmere's name again,' says Branksmere in an unpleasantly slow sort of way, 'I shall kill you!'

'Oh, it's not so easy to kill a fellow,' says Staines, beginning to bluster a bit, Branksmere's enforced calm up to this having led him fatally astray. 'It seems to me that for a fastidious man of honour, such as you boast yourself to be, you have taken all this precious easily.'

'Your price?' says Branksmere in an ominous tone.

'But perhaps,' with a sneer, 'you looked upon me in the light of a deliverer; if so you have spoiled your own——'

'Your price?' says Branksmere again, breathing heavily.

'You offer me a thousand; but you should take certain things into consideration when making an arrangement of this kind,' returns Staines, who, having recovered from his abject fit of cowardice of a moment since, now flies to the other extreme, and grows grossly insolent with a view to reasserting himself. 'Silence on the subject of your wife's character, for example, and——'

'*Damnation!*'

Almost as the word leaves Branksmere's lips he has Staines within his grasp, and forcing him upon his knees, and holding him by the collar of his coat, he drags him along the ground until he has him at Lady Branksmere's feet.

CHAPTER XLIII.

Strong reasons make strong actions.

'Look at him, regard him well,' he cries, in a low, terrible tone: 'what a brave front he shows!—How now, my gay Lothario? where are your winning smiles? Take heart, man, all is not yet lost. That equivalent for your disappointment shall be yours to-morrow morning, and now, as earnest for your money, you shall have—*this!*'

He lifts the hunting whip and brings it down with savage force upon the shoulders of the kneeling wretch. Like hail the blows descend, the miserable hound making no resistance—nay, even once or twice crying aloud for mercy as the pain grows keener.

Then comes a moment when Branksmere ceases to hold him, and Staines, crawling nearer to Muriel, seizes her skirt, and in a tone wild with terror implores her protection. In abject fear he clings to her, until Branksmere, whose fury now is ungovernable, cuts away the trembling fingers by a cruel stroke of the whip that is now nearly in ribbons.

Lady Branksmere sickens a little at this sight, and lifts both her hands to her head.

‘Enough, enough!’ she cries faintly. ‘Let him go! Would you take his life?’ She drags Branksmere back with all her might. ‘Let him go; for *my* sake.’

The words act like a spell. He flings the half-dead Staines from him, as a dog might fling a rat, and turns furiously upon her, panting more from passion than fatigue.

‘Ah! for *your* sake! You love him still, then, swindler, seducer that he is?’

‘No, no, believe me. I was thinking of you then——’

‘For the first time, eh?’ He pushes her from him, and looks back thirstily to where his adversary had fallen, but that worthy had taken advantage of the interruption to crawl away into the darkness like the reptile that he was.

‘Come,’ says Branksmere, once more approaching his wife.

‘Where?’ asks she, shrinking from him.

‘Back to the house.’

‘No! Oh, no!’ with a strong shudder.

‘But I say yes,’ sternly. ‘What!’ with a stamp of his foot, ‘would you have this indecent farce go farther? Back to the house, I say, and hide this night’s work from the world, with your life, if it yet be possible; if,’ regarding her fixedly, ‘I still can rely upon your word that you have told no one but me of your intended flight.’

‘Why should you doubt it?’ asks she coldly. ‘Did I conceal anything? When did I lie to you—even of this?’ with a comprehensive gesture. ‘I warned you. It is you who have lied to me.’ There is no emotion in her tone, no indignation, only a settled indifference.

‘Have I?’ says Branksmere. He struggles with himself for a moment, and then goes on. ‘Let that rest, the present

has to be considered. Your miserable story is known now only to you and me and——' he hesitates ; he is about to mention Mrs. Billy, who he is assured is cognizant of all, but he refrains, 'and to that cur,' he winds up through his teeth.

'But after this—to see you every day,' falters she faintly, 'to be obliged to speak—to look—oh ! it is horrible !'

'If I can bear it, you can,' returns he significantly.

'True, you have shown yourself forbearing,' she says, and shivers a little as if with cold. And in truth she is cold to her very heartstrings. Everything is at an end for her. Her affairs have come to a deadlock. Hope, even of a poor sort, is killed within her. Where is she to turn, where to go ? How may life still hold sweets for such as she ? 'All is reaped now ; no grass is left to mow ;' the end indeed has come.

There is, perhaps, an accentuation of her grief in the thought that she herself has had the chief hand in it. With all the world before her where to choose, she had elected to wed Branksmere without a loving thought towards him, and now where is she landed ? Alas for the barrenness of the coast, the cruelty of the rocks, the force of the driving waves ! She is utterly bankrupt ; there is no escape for her—no hope—nothing.

Not another word is uttered between them until they once more reach the library, whither she has mechanically followed him.

'You are cold,' he says abruptly, marking the trembling of her frame ; 'come closer to the fire.' He would have unfastened the lace wrappings round her throat, but she repels him.

'Don't touch me,' she exclaims in a fierce, miserable tone.

'As you will,' returns he, shrugging his shoulders. 'You feel injured, it seems, yet I think you should feel gratitude at this moment of your existence, if never again.'

'Gratitude to whom ?'

'To Mrs. Daryl. You should thank her all your days for what she did for you to-night.'

'Should I ?'

'She made a sacrifice for you that few women would have made——'

'And which I did not desire. Her story was a strange one when all is told. What a confession ! Yet you fall down before *her*. How much better is she than me ? Oh, no, *no* !' she cries suddenly, as if in horror of herself ; 'she is a good,

a pure woman, and I dare not malign her : but what help she has ! Her happy marriage and the love ! Always she has love,' she ends in a broken voice.

'She is, as you say, a good woman,' returns Branksmere coldly.

'And, therefore, a thing apart from the rest of your acquaintances,' sneers she.

'You at least, I repeat, should be grateful to her.'

'And yet I am not,' she laughs suddenly, in a low but rather wild fashion.

'Still hankering after that precious lover of yours,' says Branksmere contemptuously.

'No. I am regretting only the loss of the last hope I had. Henceforth I am hopeless !' Her sad laughter has died from her, and now she hides away her face as might one who is stricken to death. There is despair in her gesture.

'I am sorry to have been the one to dissipate your dream, yet that is the best service I could have done you.' Here his enforced calm gives way. 'Fool !' he cries savagely, 'can't you see how it was ?'

'I do see, and yet if I had gone with him——'

'You never would have gone with *him*, at all events. If he had refused my terms, if he had addressed another word to you, I would have killed him as I would a dog !'

'Perhaps you *have* killed him,' says she indifferently.

'Such vermin die hard. Let no fears for him mar your rest to-night. The remembrance of that cheque he is to receive to-morrow morning will keep him alive.'

At this she winces.

'To persons of your temperament,' continues he, 'safety is probably a dull good, yet believe me it has its charms, at times. To-night you have returned to it.'

'I have returned to my prison, rather,' retorts she bitterly. She turns from him and leaves the room.

Slowly she mounts the stairs, a small lamp within her hand. Her face is ghastly pale, her blood feverish ; a strong shrinking from finding herself alone with her own thoughts leads her footsteps towards the heavy curtain that has behind it the Dowager's apartments, and Madame von Thirsk's. An idle fancy to waste her time by making some inquiries about the old woman's health suggests itself to her. Moving with slow, indifferent steps, she draws back the curtain noiselessly, and steps into the dimly-lighted ante-chamber beyond.

Her senses are too benumbed to permit of her feeling any very great surprise when she meets Madame von Thirsk here. The Hungarian is leaning eagerly out of the open window, as though in expectation of something. The sound of Muriel's advancing footsteps reaching her at last, she turns abruptly towards her.

It would be impossible to avoid noticing the expression of blank dismay that overspreads her features as her eyes fall on Muriel. The blood rushes in a crimson flush to her brow, and then receding leaves her white as death. Evidently she is a prey to some very violent emotion, against which she has had no time to guard herself. To Lady Branksmere it occurs vaguely that intense and terrible disappointment is what is most plainly written upon her mobile face.

'I have disturbed you, Madame,' she says coldly, regarding her with a judicial scrutiny that the other woman plainly resents.

'Not at all. I was but looking on the night,' she answers, in a somewhat quavering voice that is hardly so carefully English as usual.

'A gloomy picture.' On the instant it flashes across Muriel's mind that this woman knew something of her intended flight. Why had she looked so surprised, so baffled, when she saw her? Had she been *longing* for her departure? Or—more hateful thought still, and one that stings more cruelly—was she waiting here for Branksmere? Was there an appointment arranged between them?

Even as she ponders hurriedly on these imaginings a slight repetition of the cry that had come to her twice before startles her into more active thought. Looking round instinctively to Madame, she finds she has disappeared, and that she is standing alone in the ante-room. Crossing hurriedly to the Dowager's door she knocks.

It is opened by Brooks; the pale, still woman who had struck Muriel so many times before as being almost bloodless. She checks Lady Branksmere as she makes a movement to enter the room.

'Her ladyship is not well to-night, my lady. I think it will be wiser not to excite her with your presence.'

'I do not remember that my presence ever excited her before. Was it she who uttered that cry just now?'

'A cry, my lady?' The woman who as a rule keeps her eyes fixed immovably upon the ground, lifts them now

suddenly and glances at Lady Branksmere. They are peculiar eyes, so light as to seem sightless.

‘Certainly, a cry. You who were with her must have heard it.’

‘She often cries aloud, my lady. I am so accustomed to hear it that perhaps I took no notice.’ Brooks’ voice is low, and a singular expression gathers round the corners of her thin lips. It is possible she had not heard the cry from wherever it came, and is now hurriedly dwelling upon that fact. A suspicion of excitement enters into her manner, with a very open desire to get rid of Muriel with all speed.

‘You will excuse me, my lady,’ she says quickly. ‘I must return to Madame.’

‘Return, by all means; I shall go with you.’

‘Not to-night, my lady. I beg you will not come in here to-night. I beg you will not disturb, distress——’

‘Has Lord Branksmere given you orders to forbid my entrance here?’

‘No, my lady. But, believe me, it will be wiser not to enter—to-night. It will be better for you to leave this.’

‘So I shall, when I have seen Lady Branksmere.’

‘You cannot see her ladyship to-night,’ says the woman, in a tone of ill-suppressed anger that is curiously mixed with fear.

‘Let me pass,’ returns Muriel curtly. For the instant it occurs to her that the woman means to resist her, but a thin, high, terribly piercing old voice coming to them checks any further argument. It is the Dowager’s.

CHAPTER XLIV.

I know him a notorious liar,
Think him a great way fool, solely a coward.

‘Who is there, mumbling at that door, Brooks? Let ’em in; let ’em in, I say. Am I to be kept imprisoned here by you, with no one to give me ever a good-day? Let ’em in, I tell you.’

‘It is I, Lady Branksmere,’ says Muriel, advancing to her, and leaning over her in the hearse-like bed in which she lies. If it could be said of anyone so old that she looks older, Muriel would have thought so; older and more enfeebled and ghast-

lier. The hair, dressed in the fashion of a long past generation, looks as though it were clinging to the skull of a corpse; the wrinkles on the forehead resemble leather more than skin; altogether the poor old soul suggests the idea of having been forgotten by death, and left here to slowly moulder above ground instead of doing it more respectably in the family vault amongst the bones of her ancestors.

'And who are you, eh? eh?' demands the old creature, lifting her weird face to stare at Muriel, whom she had seen in the morning. 'You are not the other one, are you?'

'The other?'

'Yes, yes. The little one in her white gown. So pretty; so pretty,' mumbles the old lady, her head nodding as if gone beyond her control in her excitement. '*Such a little thing.*'

'Hush, Madam! You don't know what you are saying,' interposes Brooks sharply. 'Sometimes she raves, my lady, and you know I warned you she was unwell to-night.'

'She seems to me quite as usual. That strange hallucination, or whatever it is that clings to her, never varies.'

'You are wrong, Brooks; wrong. It *was* a white gown; and there was blood upon it—bright specks of blood. Eh? Eh? I recollect it all. Eh? Oh! my bonnie boy—my handsome laddie!' Here she falls into impotent weeping, until Brooks with a sudden jerk of her arm brings her into another position, whereupon she is all nods and becks and wreathed smiles again. This receiving of visitors, and the idle maundering to them of bygone memories, is the only means of consolation she acknowledges. Once Muriel had tried to read a Psalm to her, but so great had been her indignation that she never attempted it again. Now, having bidden her good-night, she moves towards the door. As Brooks with her eyes on the ground holds it open for her, another cry, very low and subdued, seems to creep to her through the semi-darkness of the apartment.

Muriel lifts her head sharply.

'There it is again. *That* was not Lady Branksmere,' she says, scrutinising the woman's face keenly. But it never moves.

'What is it, my lady?'

'That terrible cry. It sounded like the wail of a hurt animal,' answers Muriel with a shudder.

'I heard no cry, my lady,' says the woman sullenly. 'But they do say this corridor is haunted.'

With a last glance at her impassive countenance, Muriel steps from the room and hurries swiftly out of sight, her head throbbing, her heart beating wildly. What mystery lay hidden in those rooms—those rooms beyond the one in which the old Dowager lay? From whom came that wild melancholy wail? What horrible thing is hidden in this detested castle?

And now to know that she must *for ever* dwell beneath its roof till kindly death releases her!

She sinks upon a low stool, and lets her proud head fall until it rests upon her knees, round which her hands are clasped. A forlorn figure, void of hope. Sadly, desperately, her thoughts wander, now here, now there, but—after one brief dwelling on him that ends in a long-drawn breath of heaviest disgust—never again to Staines. He has dropped out of her life, and with his loss has come the knowledge that love for him had had no part in the rôle she had planned for her own acting. There had been only the desire to escape and the foolish belief in his love, and, above all, the longing for revenge!

And now what is left her? How can she endure the daily intercourse with Branksmere—the chance meetings with Madame? These last may indeed be avoided, as Madame for the last week or two has elected to dine in her own rooms, stating as her pretext that the Dowager is failing fast; to attend whom is evidently an arduous task, as Madame has grown singularly wan and dejected during this fortnight.

The manner of the woman Brooks to-night has taken strange hold upon Muriel. Of one thing she is assured, that if anything secret lies within those rooms, she, Brooks, knows of it. To solve the mystery! to lay bare this hidden thing! to confront Branksmere with the disgraceful story he so fain would hide from *her*, his *wife*! It were well worth the trial. To get the keys, to open wide this Bluebeard's closet, even though discovery be her own ruin, is a task that seems so good to her that involuntarily she springs to her feet with flashing eyes and parted lips, though still her dead-white face rests pale and colourless. So be it, then. If Branksmere compels her to remain within his doors, let him look to it! for now, her suspicions thoroughly awake, she will show no quarter, but will lay bare this guilty secret, whatever it may be.

No sleep comes to her this night. Broad awake, she lies, hour after hour, with her eyes wide in the darkness, and her tired brain rushing through the arid plains of past griefs and

joys. She would gladly have broken away from all such miserable memories and wandered into the realm of dreams, but such rest is denied her. Aloud she calls on sleep to come to her, but all in vain; each well-known remedy she tries, yet fails in all.

A flock of sheep that leisurely pass by
One after one; the sound of rain, and bees
Murmuring; the fall of rivers, winds and seas,
Smooth fields, white sheets of water, and pure sky;—
I've thought of all by turns, and still I lie
Sleepless.

The dawning of the morn finds her still with her eyes open, staring eagerly for the first faint flecks of light.

The chill soft breeze that heralds the opening day has hardly yet arisen, however, and darkness still covers the land—a profound darkness that tells of the coming death of Night. A figure, cloaked and hooded, emerging from the quaint old oaken door on the western side of the Castle, looks nervously round her as she steps into the blackness and tries to pierce it. Moving swiftly and unerringly, with light, firm footstep in the direction of the wooded path to her right, she enters the line of elms and makes for a dense bit of brushwood farther on. Arrived at it she pauses, and a low 'cooe' issues from her lips. It is answered presently, and the woman, drawing a tiny lantern from beneath her cloak, turns it full upon the man who has answered her call.

It is Staines, though it is easier to recognise him by his clothes than his features. Bruised, swollen, utterly demoralised in appearance, with a large strip of sticking plaster across his Grecian nose, it is no wonder that the woman on first glancing at him gives way to an exclamation of horror.

'What is it; what has happened, then?' cries she in a low tone. 'I sent for you that I might learn how the affair fell through, but I had not expected this.' Madame points expressively at his disfigured face. 'Well, well, well!' she exclaims impatiently, as he makes her no reply. 'How is it with you?'

'It is all up,' snarls he hoarsely. 'Nothing now is left but flight.'

'What, you have *failed*!' hisses she through her teeth. 'With the game in your hands you have lost! Ach!'

she gives way to a free curse or two in her own language, and stamps her foot with irrepressible passion upon the ground.

'But only for the time being,' she continues eagerly. 'You will still win? Is it not? Patience—patience and your revenge for all will be sure.'

'No, it won't,' says he doggedly; 'I've done with it. I'm played out, I tell you. That Daryl woman came upon the scene and damned my cause with her.'

'Mrs. Daryl! what had she to say to you?' asks Madame, whereupon the ingenious Staines gives her his version of that little romance in Germany.

'And this you kept from me,' cries Madame furiously, when he has finished. 'Ah! if I had but known. Her silence might have been secured. I could have managed that, when one remembers she had a husband with whom she is in love. Fool! Idiot! could you not trust me in such a matter as that? If your scruples about betraying Mrs. Daryl's little secret were so strong, still——'

'I don't think it was that,' interrupts the magnanimous Staines. 'It was that I felt secure in the thought that she would not betray herself. But,' sulkily, 'there is no use talking about it now.'

'You will not make one more effort? Your influence over—*her* is surely strong enough to enable you to convince her that Mrs. Daryl lied.'

'It is too late, I tell you; she never so much as looked after me when he—when I—that is—when I left them.'

'Oh! to have toiled, and lied, and worked for this!' cries she wildly. 'How I have laboured to place that woman beneath my feet that I might trample on her, *crush* her, and now—to be entirely baulked of my revenge, and all through your imbecility.'

'Hers rather. Had she not told Branksmere of her determination to leave him, she would have been well out of your path by this time. He would gladly have been rid of her, I believe, but she misunderstood him when she supposed he would make no fight for his *honour*.'

'Well, you have lost your money,' says she.

'Why, no! It appears she had made up her mind not to touch a penny of it.'

'Hah!' She comes nearer to him and examines his features (which look rather mixed) in a curious way. 'So *that* was why you did not make a greater stand,' she cries. 'When

the money failed you, you cried off! You have been false to our bargain. You have destroyed the revenge which I swear to you was more to me than the hopes of winning his love. Ah, *poltron!* coward! *lâche!*' Her frame trembles with passion. She goes nearer to him still, and turns the lamp with an insolent air on his bowed figure, and the generally craven appearance that marks him. 'So he *beat* you!' she cries exultantly. 'Beat you before *her*—your ideal! Ach—the brave fellow!' She breaks into a loud, derisive laugh.

'Go home, you she devil, before I murder you,' breathes Staines fiercely. Seizing her by the throat he shakes her violently to and fro, and flings her from him into the thick darkness of the shrubs behind her.

CHAPTER XLV.

Filled from the heart to the lips with love.

Held fast in his hands, clothed warm with his wings.

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'WELL!' exclaims Mrs. Billy, in a heartfelt tone. She sinks into a chair and looks around her—the very picture of misery. 'What a cruel shock to him, poor fellow. I assure you the news has made me feel just anyhow! *Such* a thing to go and happen to him.'

'It is a beastly shame,' says Dick indignantly.

'What is? What's the matter?' asks Mr. Paulyn, sauntering into the room at Angelica's heels, with-whom it is quite evident he is not now on speaking terms.

'Why, haven't you heard,' asks Mrs. Billy, with tears in her eyes, 'about poor Curzon? The failure of that Cornish mine has ruined him.'

'Bless my soul!' cries Tommy. 'What a horrid thought! Where is he? Who told you? It's a lie, most likely.'

'No such luck,' returns Billy dejectedly. 'It's only too true. Poor old chap! I had a line from him about an hour ago, and Peter has run down to him to bring him up here. He can't be left by himself, you know.'

'Bless my soul!' says Mr. Paulyn again, whose conversational brilliances seem to have deserted him, and who appears to find a fund of consolation in thus entreating blessings on himself. Instinctively his eyes turn on Margery, who is

sitting a little apart from the rest, pale and silent, but certainly the least moved of the lot.

'So that young man has come to grief, hey?' calls out a gruff old voice from the hall outside. 'Never thought much of him myself.' Sir Mutius by this time has entered the room. 'Fools and their money soon part.'

'Uncle Mutius, how can you speak so of him; how was it his fault?' cries Angelica angrily. 'Did *he* make the hateful mine a failure? You must see how cruel it is of you to talk like that.'

'Hold your tongue, miss! What d'y'e mean by being so saucy? D'y'e forget that I'm your uncle, Angelica? I tell you that anyone in this world who falls from riches into poverty will be counted a fool by most.'

'You see now, Angelica, what a reprehensible thing it is to be so hopelessly ignorant as you are,' says Mr. Pauly, shaking his head reprovingly at his cousin, who looks daggers at him in return.

'Whilst men like William,' goes on the old mischief-maker, 'who raise themselves from poverty to riches by means of a monied wife are always applauded.'

If he had hoped to incense Mrs. Billy by this coarse allusion to her wealth he is disappointed. That small matron casts a glance at her husband, after which they both break into untimely mirth.

'Ah! you can laugh, can you,' growls Sir Mutius, 'when your chief friend is so sore smitten! Poor comfort he'll get from you, i' faith, in spite of all your protestations. Well, I'm glad *I* never professed affection for the young man. I've the less trouble now. How about you, Margery? He was a beau of yours. Eh?'

'Most people like Margery,' interposes Mrs. Billy quickly, noting something mutinous in the girl's mouth. 'And Curzon affected us all, more or less. You must not draw conclusions, Sir Mutius, from the fact that he was here so often.'

'Permit me to say, madam, that Mr. Bellew, whom you designate so familiarly as Curzon, was known to me long before your advent, and that you can hardly post me as to his affairs. I say he was in love with my niece, Margery, and that she had the very good sense to have nothing to do with him. A fortunate thing now, Margery, as things have turned out—hey? If you had engaged yourself to him you might

have had some difficulty in getting out of it, and marriage with a beggar would hardly suit you—eh?—ha!—Oh! Good morrow, Bellew; good morrow!’

‘You are right, Sir Mutius; marriage with a beggar means only misery,’ says Curzon calmly, who had entered the room during the old man’s speech. He is looking pale and haggard, but not beaten. A great despair lies in his honest eyes, born of a renunciation of a dear hope, but he holds his head as high as ever, and there is no faltering in his clear, sweet voice.

‘It is quite true, then, Curzon. Is there no chance for you?’ asks Angelica, who has run to him and thrown her arms round his neck to give him a loving kiss.

‘None whatever,’ bravely, ‘in the way you mean. I went up to my lawyer about it this morning, and it appears when all is over and done I shall be left with about 400*l.* a year. The old place, of course, will have to go, and——’ He stops abruptly, and walks over to the window. Mrs. Billy and Angelica burst into tears; the men fidget. Margery alone remains calm and unsympathetic as a statue.

‘Oh! hang it, you know, it’s impossible; a fellow can’t be swindled like that, without any redress,’ breaks out Tommy, commencing to prance about the room. ‘Let us all put our heads together, and try what can be done.’

‘Nothing can be done,’ says Curzon, turning round again. ‘I’ve thought it all out, and in time I shall be reconciled to it. I shall forget it all—that is’—looking down—‘*nearly* all! And one can work, you know; and there’s many a fellow hasn’t even 400*l.* a year.’

‘No, by Jove,’ acquiesces Dick heartily, who hasn’t a penny beyond what his brains will bring him.

‘I dare say to some, therefore, that amount might mean riches,’ goes on Curzon, pleading his own cause bravely, ‘though I agree with you, Sir Mutius’—looking at him with a kind smile—‘that it really does mean beggary. But that is the result of one’s training.’

‘No, no, don’t mistake me,’ says the old baronet, bringing his stick firmly down upon the carpet; ‘400*l.* a year is not to be despised. It is an excellent sum; excellent, and may be——’

‘But not to one accustomed to as many thousands,’ interrupts Mrs. Billy tearfully.

‘I was going to say, when you so rudely interrupted me,’

goes on Sir Mutius crossly, 'that if properly utilised, such a sum might make the foundation of a fortune. Now abroad——' spreading forth his hands and lifting his brows, and casting a glance full of the liveliest encouragement at Curzon——'there is *great* scope for a young man's intellect when backed up with a little capital. You might go to New Zealand, for example—a fine opening there—or to Australia, or to Canada.'

'Or to the Deuce!' supplements Billy cheerfully. 'But, after all, perhaps, none of us, however lucrative the post, would hardly care to see him there.'

'You are flippant, William,' growls Sir Mutius frowning.

'What Sir Mutius means,' says Curzon boldly, though his lips turn very white, 'is, that he would be glad to see me well out of this country, because of Margery. But there he is mistaken. I assure you, Sir Mutius, your niece never gave me any cause to hope she loved me, never even when I had something to offer her, and now——'

'I am very glad to hear it from your lips, too, although I knew it before. My niece, sir, is a young woman of sense. She will marry well, if she marries at all.'

'That is quite true!' The voice is Margery's, and a sudden silence falls upon the room as she speaks. She has risen from her seat, and is looking with her beautiful, eager eyes full at Bellew. 'I shall do well, indeed, if I marry Curzon!' She advances towards Curzon in a slow, dreamy fashion, and then stops short and holds out her hands to him. 'Will you have me, Curzon?' she asks softly.

'No—no,' cries Bellew, pressing her back from him. 'I understand the sacrifice, my—— Don't make it so hard for me, Margery; you are all so kind, so tender, and now this from you!—my best friend, *no*.'

'Ah!' murmurs she piteously, in a very agony of distress. 'Why—don't you *know*?' she covers her face with her hands. 'Take me away from this,' she whispers faintly.

'Yes, go. Into the garden—anywhere! believe her—believe every word she says,' cries Mrs. Billy, pushing them both towards the door.

'Come back here, Margery—come back, I say,' roars Sir Mutius; but Margery has gone beyond his lungs. 'And to think that I meant to make that girl my heiress!' cries he, raging. 'But she shall see—she shall see!'

At present she sees nothing, not even Curzon, who is standing beside her a very monument of despairing love.

'Don't be so unhappy about it,' he says gently, mistaking her embarrassment. They have reached the inner garden and are safe from prying eyes. 'Do you think I don't understand the generosity that prompted you to speak when Sir Mutius was making himself so objectionable; do you think when you said "Why—don't you know?" that I *didn't* know? My darling, were you afraid I should take you at your word? I sometimes used to think that as you liked me (you do like me, don't you, Margery?), and as it was in my power to make you happy in many little ways, that it was no harm to try and induce you to marry me; but now—— Well, it is out of my power to make you happy in the little ways now, and——'

'Let me speak,' cries she distractedly. 'Oh! Curzon, there is something—a small thing—just *one* thing that I must tell you.'

'That you never really cared for me? Why, I knew that, my love,' replies he rather wearily.

'No! Oh, no!' She stands back from him, and glances at him rather shamefacedly, then comes a step nearer. 'It is only—that I do love you so!' she cries suddenly, the tears running down her cheeks.

'Take care, Margery. Remember everything!' says Bellew trembling. 'I am poor. I have nothing now,' with deep agitation, 'worth offering, save my love. You know that.'

'It is because I do know it that I speak. All at once I seemed to know! When you came into the room and stood before us all, with that pale look upon your face, and said that you were ruined, I felt at once that if you hadn't a farthing on earth I was born to be your wife.'

'My little sweet soul!' says Curzon, in a low, breathless tone. He has not gone nearer. It seems as though he can do nothing but look at her, so fair, so sweet, and all his own. She has lifted her hands to her pretty, flushed cheeks, and now she raises her eyes to his shyly.

'Won't you have me for your wife, Curzon?' she whispers tremulously, and then in a moment she is in his embrace, their arms are round each other, their eyes look long as though each would search the other's heart, and when at last their lips meet, ruin, and trouble, and possible poverty are forgotten, and a breath from heaven is theirs.

For love ! Thy purest and greatest gift ; let us, Oh ! Thou Giver of all things, be duly grateful !

‘ You are sure you love me ? ’ asks he presently, as though fearful of her answer.

‘ Quite—quite sure,’ earnestly. ‘ And so happy in the thought that you love me.’

‘ You must have been happy in that thought a long time, darling.’

‘ How much you have borne from me,’ she murmurs softly. ‘ How bad I have been to you ! There is a line somewhere that always reminds me of you ; you have been so good, so patient : “ He was therewith full-filled of gentleness.” I have thought it all out long ago, you see, but I never was certain of myself until to-day.’

‘ Until I told you that I had lost everything ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘ Then I am glad that mine failed,’ says this foolish young man, simply and truly, and from his heart.

‘ That isn’t a very wise thing to say, is it ? ’ murmurs Miss Daryl thoughtfully. ‘ And yet, do you know, I myself don’t feel sorry.’

‘ Of course we shall have something,’ says he ruefully. ‘ But 400*l.* a year ! It is penury.’

‘ It is opulence,’ gaily, ‘ with the love we can throw in.’

‘ Oh, Margery ! If I was sure you would never regret it. But it looks to me almost like a swindle to get you to marry me, now that I am worth almost nothing. If you should ever reproach me it would almost kill me. Not that that would signify at all,’ hastily. ‘ Only I am afraid the disappointment and the worry might make *you* miserable.’

To this she returns no answer, save a terrible silence. With her eyes fixed obstinately upon the ground she lets a full minute go by without a word from her ; a sure method of betraying one’s anger ! Curzon feels it. Her indignation—that touches him instinctively, yet is not understood by him at the moment—lies like a weight upon him.

‘ You are vexed with me ! ’ he says contritely.

‘ Have I no cause ? ’ she answers with quick reproach. And then with a sudden, pretty, shy impulse, she overcomes herself, and drawing a little closer to him, winds her soft arms around his neck as a child might do, and raises her lips to his as though asking for a caress. This demand, how sweet it is ! His clasp tightens round her.

'The cause, sweetheart?'

'That you should ask it! And yet I have given you reason indeed to doubt me. But do not, Curzon. Try to believe that poverty and privation with you would be sweeter to me than life with any other man, had he the mines of Golconda.'

'I do believe you,' says Bellew.

This, indeed, is the last doubt he ever entertains of her.

'You must forgive me if I pained you, but I have been left so long without hope to comfort me, that certainty, now it has come, has dazzled me.' Then—'Darling, I love you! *How* I love you,' he breathes, rather than speaks.

She laughs softly, and the dawn of a blush breaks upon her cheek.

'I know that,' she says saucily. 'If *you* don't trust me, you see I trust you. But of one thing I warn you, Curzon, that I am not married to you yet. There is many a slip, you know.'

'Not when one is fairly caught.'

'Caught!' stepping daintily behind a huge rose bush. 'Who said that word? Am *I* caught, think you? Well, a last chance then! If you catch me before I reach the yew tree over there, I'll—'

Most unfairly she starts away across the velvet sward, straight for the desired harbour, giving him hardly time to understand her challenge. But love has wings, and before she has reached the aged yew she is in his grasp, and once for all she owns him conqueror.

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CHAPTER XLVI.

Every sense
Had been o'erstrung by pangs intense.
And each frail fibre of her brain,
Sent forth her thoughts all wild and wide.
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MADAME VON THIRSK has fallen asleep. A glorious flood of October sunshine streaming into the library reveals this fact.

Although so late in the autumn, the days are still bright

and enjoyable; there is only a pleasant chill upon the air, and the leaves fall softly to their graves through golden gleams of sunlight. The wind that lifts them from their boughs and wafts them to the breast of the earth is full of vigour, and indeed the whole air is rich in a vitality that should give him who breathes it renewed strength. Madame, however, seems to have derived small benefit from it. Lying back in her chair, in a slumber so deep, so motionless as to suggest exhaustion, one may notice the lines of care or anxiety or perhaps subtly concealed sorrow that mark each feature. Her lips are pale and drawn, her cheeks sunken, dark shadows lie beneath her eyes, that seem as though sleep had for some time past been a stranger to them. She looks anything but her best;—to look *that*, one must be happy, and grief and she appear to be on friendly terms.

Lady Branksmere, who has entered the room in her usual slow, lifeless fashion, so lightly as to fail to disturb so heavy a sleeper, draws near to her through a sort of fascination, and standing over her stares down upon and studies the face, so impenetrable as a rule, but now laid bare and unprotected, in its unconsciousness.

For a long time she gazes upon the woman she deems her rival, a bitter smile upon her lips. Then her eyes wander over Madame's elaborately simple toilette, over the exquisitely-shaped little brown hands so covered with costly rings, over the carefully careless knot of ribbons upon her breast, down to her waist, where something catching her eye rivets her attention immovably and puts an end to her idle examination.

After all it is only a key. A well-sized key of a very ordinary type. In effect, a door key! It could hardly be termed an ornament such as might be worn by so fastidious a dresser as Madame, yet it hangs now from her belt by a slight but strong silken cord. It had evidently been concealed in the bosom of her gown, and had escaped during her slumber, and is now lying so that anyone may see it.

Lady Branksmere's lips pale, and her eyes grow bright as they rest upon it. Not for one moment does she hesitate. She forms her purpose on the spot, nor falters in the fulfilling of it. All is fair in love and war, and surely it has been war for many a month between this woman and her. Taking up a pair of scissors lying on the table near, she cuts deliberately the silken cord, and possessing herself of the key, leaves the room.

Not once does her heart fail her. And when she stands before Madame's door and fits the key into the lock, and throws it open, and at last crosses the threshold of the forbidden chambers, no sense of fear, no desire to draw back whilst yet there is time oppresses her, only a longing to solve the problem that for so many months has been an insult to her. Surely, as it seems to her, the right is on her side. As an outraged wife, she takes her stand. He—Branksmere—had compelled her to return to his roof, had cut from beneath her feet the sweet revenge she had so carefully prepared, had foiled her effort to escape, by which not only her, but his, freedom might have been secured, and now—— Well, now let him look to it. If he has insisted upon her return, and forced her to occupy the position of head of his house, she will exercise the powers given, and refuse to permit within her house, apartments denied to her.

She throws up her head, and it is with a sense of positive triumph that she steps into the first room and looks around her.

A charming room, delicately but simply furnished. An easel in one corner, a few water colours lying loosely upon the tables, and a low lounge, covered with a dainty cretonne; a Valerie jar or two, and a Dresden bowl, made sweet with flowers; a few Indian mats. A little breeze that comes through the open windows wafts to and fro the soft white curtains. Upon the hearth a gentle smouldering fire. Altogether it is a restful room, that speaks of a mind at peace with all the world.

Muriel takes it in at a glance, and hastens towards the door opposite to the one she has entered. It leads to a room, small, and evidently meant as a mere passage from the room left to the one beyond, the door of which is partially open. Muriel has half crossed this ante-chamber, when a soft musical sound coming apparently from some place near at hand causes her to stand still. The voice of one singing! Yet hardly singing, either. There is not sufficient coherence about it to let such a term be applied to it; it is rather a low harmonious crooning that breaks upon her ear. The sound is sweet, and pathetic and—*young*!

Muriel's heart begins to beat tumultuously. A voice here, a woman's voice, and Madame von Thirsk asleep downstairs! What can *this* mean? Is she on the brink of the discovery of some mystery that hitherto has come to her, vaguely indeed, and never in such a guise as this? Who is this

singer? She pushes open the half-closed door, and steps lightly into the room.

At the far end of it, seated on a prie-dieu, with her lap full of flowers, sits a girl—a pale, slender girl—dressed all in white. There is not an atom of colour about her anywhere, and her face, which is a fine oval, is, if possible, more colourless than her gown. Her eyes are lowered, and she is playing in a curiously absent way with the blossoms, amongst which her fingers are straying aimlessly, and is singing to them in that strange monotone that had startled Muriel.

Now she looks up—some instinct that tells her someone is watching, making her senses keen. She stares straight at Muriel, and her eyes are a revelation. They are blue, but such an unearthly blue, and what is the cold dull gleam in them? And are they looking at Muriel, or at some object beyond her? Her fingers still play idly amongst the flowers, whilst these strange eyes of hers are wandering vaguely.

‘Come in, come in,’ she murmurs eagerly, so eagerly that Muriel ponders within herself as to whether she and this white, smiling girl may not have met before under different circumstances. That she betrays no agitation, no awkwardness at thus coming face to face with the hostess who has not invited her to her house, is strange indeed. She is looking unconcernedly at Muriel with a smile upon her lips—a soft, yet stereotyped smile that is rather unpleasant.

Has she ever met her before? Surely she must have done so, so utterly without surprise, so friendly is the greeting she accords her. And then that expression about the mouth—shadowy, but yet like—who is it like?

‘More; have you brought more?’ asks the pale girl anxiously, leaning forward, the eternal smile still upon her face. It seems to Muriel that she would be almost more than beautiful but for the nameless something that mars her expression. ‘I haven’t nearly enough,’ she goes on confidentially; ‘see, it is quite a poor show.’

She waves her hand about the room blithely, but in a rather disconnected way, and Lady Branksmere, following her gesticulations, sees that the apartment is literally crowded with flowers of all kinds and all hues, save *one*. No crimson, red, or scarlet blossom lies amongst them.

She brings back her glance again to the girl, and now regarding her more fixedly, perceives that the face is not so young as she had at first imagined. A little shudder passes over

her as she meets the stranger's more direct gaze, and sees that she has risen and is coming towards her. Her glance is half exultant, half cunning. She creeps closer to Muriel and whispers slyly—

‘Do you know whose birthday it is?’

‘No,’ in a frozen tone.

‘No? Why it is *his*! That is why the flowers are here, the flowers he loves so well.’ Muriel stares at her. Branksmere's passion for flowers had not come beneath her notice. ‘By-and-by for dinner—we dine late, he and I—I shall be decked with them. He likes to see me so. His heartsease, as he calls me. A pretty name, eh?’

She is running her fingers up and down Muriel's arm as she speaks, with a low, lingering touch. Lady Branksmere abruptly moves beyond her reach.

‘He dines with you!’ she repeats in a voice of disgust. Then, icily—‘Do you know who I am? Whose house this is?’

‘His,’ says the girl absently. ‘Oh, yes! he will come to-night. Sometimes,’ dropping her voice, ‘he cannot come because there is someone below,’ pointing to the ground, ‘who keeps him, holds him, chains him, so that he dare not come. But soon she will be gone; Thekla says so.’

‘Who is he? Of whom are you speaking?’ asks Muriel. Her tone is so harsh, so strained, that even to herself it is hardly recognisable.

‘Do you not know him, then? Look, you shall see him.’ She points to a distant table, where Muriel, who is feeling sick and cold, sees a large cabinet photograph of—her husband! She knows it well—its fellow lies in one of the albums downstairs.

‘He will come to-night?’ she asks faintly, looking at the girl, whose face is no whiter than her own.

‘To-night, yes. It is his festival, see you, and we shall keep it merrily! Listen!’ She holds up one forefinger, and advances upon Muriel, nay, actually presses upon her in her eagerness, as Muriel instinctively recoils with horror from her touch. ‘If you wish it you shall be invited too! I'll get him to ask you; he refuses me nothing; but don't let Thekla know. Thekla, little cat! She would keep me an eternal prisoner here, but he is on my side, and you may rely upon his aid in getting you here.’ She laughs gleefully, and again claps her hands. ‘We shall outwit her,’ she cries.

‘We?’

‘Ay. You and I and he, and——’ She pauses, as if confused, and then goes on—‘You will have remarked,’ she whispers confidentially, ‘that she has grown very stupid of late.’

‘Who has grown stupid?’

‘Why, Thekla. No,’ impatiently, ‘we won’t have *her*. You are new, fresh, strange. He likes strange faces, and we shall coax him so, eh?’

‘What is Branksmere to you?’ cries Muriel sharply.

‘Do you not even know that? Have they not told you? Why—*my husband!*’ returns the stranger with a peculiar little jerky wave of her hand. A low cry breaks from Muriel. She staggers backwards, and puts out her arm as though to ward off some advancing horror. ‘To-night, to-night, you shall be made known to him!’ goes on the girl lightly. ‘But Thekla! Why, she can stay’—pointing to a small door, covered by a silken curtain, that up to this has escaped Muriel’s notice—‘with the old witch in there!’ again the unmeaning smile widens her lips. ‘They’ll be fine company for each other, eh?’

She laughs. To her dying day Lady Branksmere never forgets that laugh. It rings through the room, yet where is the mirth in it? Oh! the terrible discordancy of it, the dearth of merriment in the eyes, the open, gaping mouth!

‘You will come, you pale thing?’ she asks eagerly; ‘and we’ll sing to him, you and I. Say, is it?’

Beauty sat bathing by a spring,
Where fairest shades did hide her.

Hey, nonny, nonny O!

Hey, nonny, nonny!

Her voice now is slightly raised, her manner excited. ‘And we’ll dance, too,’ she cries, catching up her skirts with both hands. ‘Sing hey! Sing ho! Hey, nonny, nonny, O!’

She lifts her feet in a jerky fashion, and sways to and fro in a very ecstasy of delight.

‘Join in—join in!’ she calls to Muriel, and sways more eagerly, and twirls herself round and round with a terrible speed and laughs again. A wild laughter this time that ends in a wilder shriek.

Lady Branksmere, utterly unnerved, makes a movement towards the door. Unhappily her flight conveys the idea that

she is afraid. The girl springs after her, clutches at her gown, and clings to it. A most horrible glare has come into her eyes. Muriel shrinks from her, and as she does so a large bunch of crimson ribbons, lying hidden amongst the folds of the tea-green gown she is wearing, is brought conspicuously into view and strikes upon the sight of the stranger, and then—it is all over!

In a second—with one spring she is upon Muriel, her fingers round her throat, her eyes ablaze, the demon madness wide awake! The fair, soft, childish face of a moment since is now transfigured—distorted beyond recognition, and the lips, purple and widely parted, are quivering with a rage that knows no reason!

Shriek upon shriek rends the air! Great Heaven! Even at this awful moment, when her breath is fast failing her, beneath the clutch of the maniac's fingers, and when those wild, glaring eyes are gazing into hers, Muriel remembers that terrible cry, and once again imagines herself to be upon that luckless corridor at midnight.

Again and again that awful yell rises, growing fiercer as time goes on. Not all the padding on the doors can stifle it! Closer and closer the mad woman's arms clasp Muriel in that deadly embrace, until at last with a faint groan her victim ceases to struggle, and with a sigh her head falls backwards.

There is a crash—a groan——!

CHAPTER XLVII.

Death is the liberator of him whom freedom cannot release, the physician of him whom medicine cannot cure, and the comforter of him whom time cannot console!

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THE touch of cold water upon her brow, a struggle with memory, and Muriel once more opening her eyes looks languidly around. Everything has come back to her. She remembers that last horrible scene, and wonders vaguely how it is she is now alive and in her own room, with Bridgman bending over her. Has Branksmere heard of it? And if so, why——

Her eyes meet those of her maid, who is gazing solici-

tously at her, and sinking back again amongst her pillows she looks at her inquiringly. Was it Bridgman who had come to her rescue? Is the secret at last betrayed to the household? What does this woman know?

‘I fainted, Bridgman?’

‘Yes, my lady, but you are better now. You must not try to think yet awhile, but just lie quiet and let me bathe your head.’

‘Did—you find me?’

‘Oh, no! my lady, you must have been gone off in quite a dead sort of way for a long time before I was called. I ’eard the bell ringing violently, and I ran upstairs to find you lying on the lounge in my lord’s arms, for all the world as if you were dead. “Good ’evings,” says I, “what’s come to my lady?” and then he just waited to see how you were, my lady, and when you gave signs of coming to your breath again, he had to run away to her ladyship, the Dowager, he said.’

So! He had thrown her over upon her maid’s tender mercies. Hour after hour had gone by and he had not returned even to inquire how she was. It was half-past three then, it must now be quite six o’clock, judging by the darkness without, and the drawn curtains and the lighted lamps, yet up to this he has studiously absented himself. On the very first opportunity he had left her, and hastened back to— She shudders. Oh! what terrible link binds him to that unfortunate creature!

‘Her ladyship is worse, then?’ she asks faintly, keeping up the fiction.

‘Yes, my lady; much worse. Not expected to recover, I ’ear. Her screams was hawful a while ago. Quite unearthly, as I’m told.’

The Dowager’s screams! Muriel almost smiles. How plain it all is to her now. She shivers nervously.

‘You are feeling ill again, my lady,’ says Bridgman anxiously, who is very fond of her. ‘My lord said you were to take this brandy, if possible, and said, too, he’d be back as soon as he could. Do now try to take it, my lady.’

‘I want nothing—nothing,’ returns Muriel impatiently; ‘only to be alone. Go, Bridgman, go. I cannot rest with anyone near me.’

‘But, my lady——’

‘I promise I shall ring for you if I feel weaker,’ says Muriel gently. ‘Now go, my good Bridgman. Ah——!’

She starts and makes an effort to rise to her feet as Branksmere enters the room, even as the maid leaves it.

Pale as Muriel was before, she is now ghastly as she confronts her husband. As for him there seems to be but one thought in his mind. He comes up to her, his brows contracted, and seizing her by the arm turns her to the nearest lamp.

'You are safe, unhurt,' he mutters, scanning her with eyes that would seek to rend concealment from her. So open, so terribly real is his anxiety, that it should have touched her—but she remains cold and unmoved. She even withdraws herself from his grasp as though it is hateful to her, and goes away from him a step or two.

'She might have killed you,' he says in a low tone. He looks white and haggard, and is trembling in every limb. 'What possessed you to enter that room?'

'If you expect me to apologise for my intrusion there, you will be disappointed,' returns she slowly. 'I see no reason why I, as mistress of this house, should not enter any apartment in it.' Even as she speaks she remembers how by her own act some time since she had forfeited all right to any claim upon this household, and the hot blood mounting to her head almost chokes her. But he appears to notice nothing.

'When I found you there,' he goes on, 'in her grasp—Mrs. Brooks was quite unable to drag her off you—I thought, I feared——' He shudders violently.

'I beg you will no longer distress yourself about me,' says Muriel curtly; 'I am well, uninjured. All I now require,' regarding him steadily, 'is an explanation.'

He pauses, he is about to reply, when—

'You shall have it,' exclaims a voice from the doorway, where Madame von Thirsk stands, pale and wild, her arms folded upon her breast. 'Follow me,' she says; and as if impelled to obey her command Muriel moves mechanically forward, and with Branksmere, pursues her way once more to the ill-fated room that had been so full of danger for her.

Standing just outside it, Branksmere pauses.

'She is better?' he asks anxiously, addressing Madame, who had preceded them with a lighted taper in her cold hand.

'Better?' She regards him mournfully, and yet as one who barely understands. 'Ay! she is better.'

'And—and sane?' questions Branksmere in a subdued voice. 'There is no fear of a further shock for——' He

hesitates, he is evidently full of fears for—Muriel. Madame von Thirsk, with a cry of anguish, flings her arms suddenly above her head.

‘Sane! Man, she is *dead!*’ she cries in piercing accents. She darts forward, and flinging back a heavy curtain lays wide an alcove, where upon a bed lies stretched in all the majesty of death a pale, still form. Tall candles are burning at the head and foot of the bed; from some flowers, scattered upon the coverlet, a faint, oppressively sweet odour is filling the room. Muriel, spellbound, gazes at the silent figure. It is the body of her who a few hours since had been so full of a giant strength. And yet now—how low she lies! how motionless! At last the poor, tired brain has gained its rest, and that an eternal one! She is indeed dead! And yet—

Her mind, now vested with its garb of light,
Shines all the brighter for its former toil.

There is a serenity about the face of the lifeless girl that in its earlier days had seldom rested there.

Muriel falls upon her knees and covers her face with her hands.

‘Dead!’ breathes Branksmere. ‘Great Heaven! since when?’

‘Almost as you left her last the change came. She was exhausted and quiet then, but as the door closed on you she cried aloud to me to bring a light. The room was flooded with light, so I knew what that meant. In a little while she dropped back dead! dead!’ She sways herself to and fro. ‘Oh! oh!’ she moans, and seems as though she would have broken into loud lamentations, but she checks herself violently, and clenching her hands looks with a terrible despair in her glance at the quiet figure stretched upon the bed in that grand complacency that belongs to death alone. She is gazing upon all that belongs to her upon earth—cold, dull earth itself now—soon to Mother Earth to be returned.

‘You want an explanation,’ she says in a hard voice, addressing Lady Branksmere, ‘about her. Well, you shall have it.’

‘She was——?’ ventures Muriel, with trembling lips.

‘My sister—the one thing left me that I *might* love!’ She checks herself. The emotion dies from her. ‘To the point,’ she says. ‘You are wondering at her presence here; you shall learn how it was. She,’ pointing to the dead girl, ‘was the mistress of your husband’s brother!’

A smothered ejaculation breaks from Lord Branksmere. He makes a gesture as though he would speak, but Madame suppresses him.

'The truth, the truth, Branksmere—let us have the truth at last,' she cries wildly. The anguish of her face is miserable. 'Listen to me,' she goes on hurriedly, speaking to Muriel. 'She loved the late Lord Branksmere and he loved her, but marriage between them was impossible because of his previous marriage with Lady Anne.'

Muriel unclasps her hands from before her face and looks up startled.

'You know that he was killed in a duel,' goes on Madame in a dull, monotonous tone. 'You do not know who killed him. It was my brother, *her* brother! For our honour's sake he slew her lover—too late! The news of his death came to her abruptly—she'—for the first time Madame falters—'was not very strong at the time, and the shock destroyed her brain!'

'Spare yourself!' implores Branksmere in a whisper. 'Let me explain the rest.'

'I have promised Lady Branksmere the recital of this merry tale,' returns Madame rigidly, 'and I shall keep my promise. Hear the end,' addressing Muriel. 'Alas, no!' sharply; 'the end you see, but what there remains for me to tell. To please his dying brother, and to conceal my unhappy sister from the vengeance of our family, your husband consented to bring her here secretly; no one knew of her coming save Brooks, Lord Branksmere and Madame the Dowager, to whom the murdered man was inexpressibly dear. Here she has lived—unknown; here died. It is all! Her tale is finished.' She makes a melancholy motion towards the bed. 'If in her life she ignorantly caused you pain, you can now rejoice in that she is dead!'

Her tone is bitterness itself, and the glance she casts at Muriel full of undiminished hatred. Lady Branksmere shudders. She has been calm, but now rising drops into a chair with an exclamation of horror.

'Oh, no! not that,' she breathes faintly.

Branksmere regards her keenly.

'This is too much for her,' he says, speaking rapidly to Madame. 'Let no more be said at present. You can have any further explanation later on.'

'I shall have no opportunity,' returns she sullenly. 'Nor

is there anything more that I would say. All now is at an end.' Her eyes fasten on Branksmere's hand as it rests upon the back of his wife's chair. 'Yes,' she repeats brokenly, 'all indeed is at an end!'

'Come!' says Branksmere, leaning anxiously over Muriel, whose beautiful face looks ghastly. He has apparently forgotten all but her. As in a dream she rises to her feet, and with a long, long sigh moves towards the door, he following. Madame seeing him thus leaving her—for ever as it seems to her now—without so much as one regret, one kindly glance, feels as though her very heart is being torn from her body. She puts up one hand as if to still the throbbing of her throat; she makes a swift movement as if to overtake him; her lissome figure sways to and fro, through the intensity of its emotion, and then words break from her.

'A word, Branksmere!' she cries hoarsely; 'one word! It is my last! I leave this house within an hour or two never to return; spare me then a moment, if only in memory of the past!'

'My dear Thekla, why do you speak to me like this?' asks Lord Branksmere reproachfully. 'My time is yours when I have seen Lady Branksmere to her room.'

Stung by his openly-expressed concern for his wife, Madame recovers her composure.

'Nay,' she says coldly. 'It is of no consequence. After all, what word is left me now except farewell?'

'Many, I hope,' very kindly.

'Not one. I leave this to-morrow morning, with—her.'

'So soon?' questions Branksmere with an expressive glance at the curtain behind which that quiet body rests, surrounded by light.

'Ay, at once, at once,' returns she, with an impatient gesture. 'Oh, to be gone!' She conquers herself presently. 'There must be no scandal, Branksmere,' she murmurs feverishly. 'All must be done in secret. I will have no word spoken against her, either alive or dead. I depend upon you to so manage this last office for her as you have managed everything else. Get us back to our old home in France, I do beseech you, without the truth being made manifest.'

'You may rely upon me,' gently.

'Ah, when have I *not* relied upon you!' cries she, with a swift, wild outburst of grief that is terrible.

‘But I would have you spare yourself,’ says Branksmere tenderly. ‘That poor soul’—he bends his head reverently—‘her body must be removed from this with the daylight, and I shall go with it. But you—so overburdened and crushed with sorrow as you are—you must stay on here for a while at least.’ His voice is full of the deepest commiseration, and he turns his glance impulsively upon Muriel as though imploring from her a friendly word. Muriel, who is not ungenerous, responds to it.

‘I entreat, Madame, that you will remain here,’ she says hastily, lest the good impulse fail her. ‘Why should you leave now ; now, when your grief is so terribly fresh to you ?’

‘I thank you,’ replies Madame icily, turning to fix upon her a glance full of undisguised abhorrence. ‘I thank you for the first kindly word you have accorded me since the commencement of our most distasteful acquaintance. Now, on the eve of its termination, I thank you for it.’

Lady Branksmere flushes.

‘In spite of all you have said, Madame, I still beg you will consider my house your home for the present.’

‘Your house could never be my home,’ returns Madame slowly.

Lady Branksmere, with a slight bow, quits the apartment. As she gains her own room her husband, who has followed her, checks her progress.

‘I cannot enter into matters now,’ he says gravely. ‘As you will have comprehended, I shall have much to do, about—the removal of the body—before morning. I shall, of course, go to France with it, and see it interred. Then I shall return, to give you any further explanation that may seem necessary.’

‘When will you return ?’ asks she languidly, with downcast lids.

‘On Saturday, I hope, by the last train. I shall be here by ten o’clock. Will that be too late for you to receive me ? I am anxious, now that the seal of secrecy has been broken and my promise to the dead at an end, to tell you everything.’

‘It scarcely seems worth while,’ she says, still more indifferently.

‘To me it does. Will you see me when I arrive ?’

‘Yes.’ She turns from him with slow, tired footsteps, and, entering the room, closes the door behind her. This is

her farewell to him. Branksmere, thus unceremoniously left outside in the corridor, frowns darkly, and with an angry exclamation strides back to the chamber of death.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

He whom passion rules is bent to meet his death.

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NEVERTHELESS, as he re-enters the Castle to-night—Saturday—his first thought is for her. He mounts the staircase quickly, and knocking at her door responds eagerly to her permission to enter. He can see at a glance that she is looking extremely ill, white and listless, and with heavy purple shadows beneath her large grey eyes. The slender hands, lying languidly upon her lap, look tired and powerless, the blue veins standing out upon the backs of them in thin pale cords. There is a suspicion of mental fatigue about her whole bearing—of a strain—a painfully-suppressed nervousness—very trying, that is evidently telling terribly on her strength. She is dressed in a simple white gown, with a knot of ribbon at her throat, and her hair is bound at the back in a loose fashion that also bespeaks weariness. She is lying back in her chair, and there is enough weakness in her attitude to appeal to his sense of pity very keenly.

‘You are ill,’ he says abruptly, when she has given him her hand, with an evident effort.

‘A little. Yes. But it is merely because sleep has failed me for a night or two.’

‘Has Margery been staying with you?’

‘No. I would have nobody; though she wished to remain with me when here this morning.’

‘You should not have been alone after all you went through,’ says Branksmere impatiently.

‘I am accustomed to be alone,’ returns she dryly.

Branksmere looks as though he would have answered this, but checks himself. There is a long silence, and then, as though following out a train of thought, he says slowly—

‘I waited to see her buried. It was the last thing I could do for her, whose fortunes were so unfortunately mixed up with our family. Madame von Thirsk gave you an outline of her story; I am here to fill up the blanks. I own that I have

wronged you in keeping secret from you her existence here, but my promise to the dead bound me to silence.'

'To the dead?'

'To my brother,' gravely. 'It is a long story and a sad one. It is more,' exclaims Branksmere, with a sudden vehemence, 'it is a shameful one! Not so far as she is concerned. I would have you understand that. I—I have reason to know that she never knew of Anne; that he had concealed from her all knowledge of his marriage, and that some ceremony had been gone through between him and Adela Braemar that had satisfied her, and betrayed her into believing herself his wife. She never knew the truth; for that, at least, I am grateful. Death seized on him, and madness overtook her, before it was discovered!'

'But her presence here?'

'That, I admit, was an unpardonable folly. An action I have had reason to regret many a day since. I might easily have found for her a shelter in some other place, but just then I was confused, horrified, and could think of nothing but the fact that my brother had confided her to my care. And after all,' says Branksmere with decision, 'I don't believe that I do regret it, save in what it has made you suffer; or rather'—correcting himself—'because of the inconvenience it has caused you.'

To this Muriel makes no reply, though perhaps he had expected one, as he paused before going on again.

'I was in Munich at the time; my brother (Lord Branksmere then) in Potsdam. A telegram received by me arrived too late to prevent any interference on my part, even supposing it could have done any good, which it certainly would not. Using all the speed I could, I only arrived upon the fatal field as the shot was being exchanged between Branksmere and Adela Braemar's brother, who had learned by chance the actual truth, and knew the dishonour of his sister. I sprang forward only to receive the body of my brother as he sank insensible into my arms. He was mortally wounded.'

'But not dead!' cries Muriel faintly.

'Not dead, no! He lived long enough to confess all to me, and to implore me to succour the girl he had so cruelly wronged, but so deeply loved. He gained my promise not only to succour her, but to shield her from the vengeance of her family, who had openly declared their intention to take her life. With her blood they would wipe out both her name

and her disgrace from off the face of the earth. They were a wild, lawless race, and it is probable they meant to keep their word.'

Muriel's face has grown like marble; so cold, so still. The word *disgrace* is ringing through her brain. That poor soul! it had come to her most innocently, but what should be said of one who——

'He made me swear I would befriend her for his sake, and that I would never betray her secret. I gave my oath as he desired. I swore it to the dying. Yet there was a time when for your sake I would have broken even that solemn covenant, believing he would not have had me keep it to the destruction of my own happiness.' He sighs heavily. 'It is too late now, however, to lament over that.' He looks at her intently.

'Go on,' she says, with lowered brow and lips compressed.

'He died in my arms! There was some small comfort for me in the thought that my presence had soothed him in his last moments, and that he had died satisfied that I would befriend the woman he loved. At the end he bade me hasten to her and prepare her for the awful news that awaited her. But his voice had grown thick and indistinct, and I suppose I misunderstood what he said, because I went first to the wrong house, and when at last I gained the right address I found the body had been brought home before me, and that by some unlucky chance the poor girl had met the bearers face to face, and that, in fact, the dead man—her lover—her husband, as she believed—had been laid almost at her feet.'

Lady Branksmere raises both hands to the side of her head, as though to shut out the horrible scene, but no word escapes her.

'I shall never forget that moment—Adela in her white gown; the dead man covered with blood; the brilliant sunshine; the silence of the bearers, and through all, the gay, terrible laughter of some children playing in the gardens below. The girl said nothing, but she went slowly up to him, and bending down laid her cold fingers on his colder brow. "Why, how is this, sweetheart?" she said. It was an odd little speech, wasn't it? There was really nothing in it, and yet I shall never forget it. I can hear it always. It thrilled through the room. The very men ceased to breathe as they listened. It was something in her voice, her manner, the cruel stillness of her. She seemed to comprehend so poorly,

and yet her comprehension was so complete—so fearful in its consequences! As she leaned over him some drops of his life blood, warm and red, fell upon her white gown. She burst out laughing then, and called to us to see how pretty they were. It was an awful scene.'

His voice has sunk very low; it now ceases altogether. He seems to be falling into a sort of reverie, when a gesture from Muriel brings him back to the present.

'There is more?' she questions feverishly.

'You shall hear it.' He turns away abruptly, and going to the window pushes back the curtains, and gazes out into the blackness of the night beyond. 'That night her child was born!'

Muriel, with a sharp exclamation, lets her fan slip from her to the ground.

'That night, too, it died—happily! The mother's mind died with it, but her body lived. Poor girl, her heart was broken; it was merciful that memory was taken from her.'

'Was there no return? No vague remembrance?'

'None. After a while strange fancies grew within her. I bore a strong resemblance to my brother, and soon she grew to connect me with him in some dull way, and later on believed me to be indeed the Branksmere she had known and loved. I alone could console her in her bursts of unmeaning grief. I alone could control her by a word—a look—when she fell a prey to the violence that at times overcame her. That evening when you ventured into her room, had they not called me hastily I do not know what would have been the result. She was more violent then than I had ever seen her.'

'It was the fact of my being a stranger——'

'No. It was the red ribbons on your gown. Ever since that fatal morning when the blood of her lover dyed her dress, it has been impossible to let her see anything even approaching that colour. The demon was raging within her when I entered, her hands were on your throat. Mrs. Brooks with all her strength could not sway her one inch from you. But when she saw me she grew calmer at once, and rose to her feet and came to me as a child might come who knew itself in some disgrace, yet knew itself beloved.'

'Was Mrs. Brooks the only one there? I have a confused idea that——' Lady Branksmere hesitates and frowns slightly, as one might to whom remembrance is difficult.

'A correct one. Yes, Madame von Thirsk was there. It

appears she had arrived on the scene before Mrs. Brooks knew anything of the matter, but was either too horrified or too frightened to give the alarm. Mrs. Brooks providentially came in with a message from my grandmother, or else all Thekla's influence might have been powerless to save you.'

He brushes his hand across his forehead, and draws his breath heavily, but Muriel is too lost in a new thought to heed him. So! Madame had been there and had been too frightened to call for assistance! Too horrified to try to save her from a cruel death! Death! Ah, there lay the charm of it. To see her indeed dead, Madame would willingly have imperilled her very soul! A sensation of sickness creeps over Muriel, and compels her to lean back in her chair and gasp for breath. Oh, the blessedness of the relief that follows on the recollection that that murderess has left the house. She had stood by, *waiting* for the life to leave her; had perhaps excited the wretched maniac; had gloated in the thought that soon her enemy would be beyond recall; had watched her struggles and laughed at her efforts to free herself. Oh!

A wild cry breaks from her. She starts to her feet, and stares at him with terror in her eyes.

'What is it?' exclaims Branksmere anxiously.

'Nothing! Nothing!' She has subsided into her chair again, and has covered her face with her hands. 'Only some horrible thought!'

'You have listened too long to such an unhappy story,' declares Branksmere. 'Some other time I can finish——'

'No; let it be ended now for ever. There is one thing I want to know. She spoke of flowers—a festival——'

'It was the anniversary of Arthur's birthday. She always remembered that whatever else might be forgotten. For months before she would question us as to the exact day—waiting and longing to do honour to it. He had a passion for flowers, and to please him she would have the apartments that belonged to her decorated with them on that and on their wedding day. Poor thing! It was her delight to keep their rooms bright with them in the old days in Hungary. She was very gentle in her calm days, but when excited it was very difficult to manage her. She was indeed a great responsibility.'

'You had not to undertake it alone, however. You had Madame to help you.'

'Yes. That was fortunate,' replies he simply. 'She was

devoted to Adela, and the poor afflicted girl clung to her in her more lucid moments. Thekla alone, and Brooks, knew of her being here. And Madame's avowed affection for my grandmother made a good pretext for her continued residence here—an affection amply returned by the Dowager. However, her presence made it impossible for me to spend much time at home. Nor did I care to live here until—I met you.' A mournful expression has come into his eyes. 'You asked me once if I had ever seen Madame's rooms, and I told you no. That was the truth. But I do not blame you for your disbelief. Evidence was very strong against me. How could I explain that the rooms belonged to Adela, that Madame's were on the other side of that wing? You little knew when you so harshly condemned me, how sad a task was mine—to care for, to console, to govern that poor mad creature.'

Lady Branksmere presses her hand against her throat in a convulsive way, as if suffocating.

'It was easy enough to manage her when first she came here—at least so they told me. But lately the attacks of madness had grown more frequent, and her screams were horrible. They were unheard by the servants, fortunately, who all believe that corridor haunted and never enter it. But you heard her? That night when I found your bracelet——'

He waits expectantly for a word from her, but none comes. Her back is turned to him, or he might perhaps have noticed the growing pallor on her face.

'I would have spoken'—he goes on in a low voice—'I should have betrayed all then—but you gave me no opportunity—you would not hear me.'

'It was too late!' Her voice is so faint as to be almost indistinct; with difficulty she conquers the sensation that threatens to sink her into insensibility. 'Was it for your oath's sake you kept silent all that time?'

'For that—and for one other powerful reason. There was Anne! His wife! She knew nothing; she never so much as dreamed of her husband's treachery. He and she were not, perhaps, altogether suited to each other. It was a marriage arranged by the two families—hers and ours; and no one for a moment pretended to believe it was a love match. But outwardly they got on as well as the world could expect, and at least she never knew of a rival, never heard of a reason why his memory should not be respected by her. His death helped to cover a multitude of faults with her, and I fear she

has often thought me cold when I have not ardently responded to her kindly words spoken in praise of his memory. How could I destroy her faith? How lay bare his infidelity to her? How could I dare to wound that gentle heart? Was I to be the one to teach her to despise my brother?’

He has grown agitated, and ceases somewhat abruptly. Muriel, motionless, staring before her with wide eyes, is lost in a labyrinth of miserable suspicion. That story he has just revealed to her—was it purposely told? What has this vile tale to do with her that it so clings to her brain? A woman shamed—a woman lost! And yet this poor soul was more innocent than she—*Muriel*—who of her own free will would have accepted the shame and cut herself adrift from all things good. She interlaces her fingers tightly, and rising to her feet—heavily—because of the dull, strange lethargy that is fast conquering her, turns her gaze on Branksmere.

‘I have wronged you,’ she cries feverishly—‘beyond forgiveness! That I know now! While you—you——! Think, remember well, what it is I should be now but for you. A thing lost, degraded.’ She is growing terribly excited, and her eyes are like large coals of fire in her white face. ‘I would have you remember *well*,’ she repeats again. ‘And that it is of your wife such words may be used. *Your wife*, Branksmere. *Think* of it! That should make you harder.’

She has broken into dry sobs, and has turned aside to hide her face upon the arm that is leaning against the mantelshelf.

‘Hush!’ exclaims Branksmere sternly, but very anxiously, as he marks this growing agitation that is overpowering her. He has come within the light of the lamp nearest to her, and now seeing her face, it horrifies him. Her lips are white, her eyes are as those of the dead. ‘Muriel—what is it?’ he cries aloud. But even as he speaks she throws out her arms convulsively, sways heavily to and fro, and falls senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER XLIX.

My melancholy haunts me everywhere,
And not one kindly gleam pierces the gloom
Of my dark thoughts, to give a glimpse of comfort.

THE world is three weeks older to-day, and the events of that past night seem to have happened quite a long while ago. Three weeks, and as yet suspense and evil anticipation are not at an end. They had lifted her from where she fell at Branksmere's feet, and carried her to her bed, and Margery and Mrs. Billy had watched over her all through that long night of insensibility until the dawn came, and with it a glimmer of consciousness that died almost as it was born.

In twenty-four hours she was in a raging fever. Her brain was affected, and it seemed to those closely investigating the case—the great men from the town and the little men from the country round—that small, indeed, was the hope that could be entertained.

All her lovely hair was shorn away. Her dry, parched lips made feverish the beholder. Her large eyes aflame with the fire that was inwardly consuming her, turned to each one a vacant glance, and from night to morn, and morn to night, she rolled her tired head unceasingly from side to side, calling always, always upon—Mrs. Billy!

No other being could satisfy her. Not even Margery, with her cool, sweet touch, and her loving tenderness. It was ever for the sister, who was a stranger to her, that she called. Perhaps—for who can read the workings of a mind diseased?—perhaps through all the sad riot of the maddening fever that played such havoc with her brain, she remembered that Mrs. Billy had been the one most instrumental in saving her from the miserable path into which a wild desire for revenge would have turned her; that she had been the one to make it impossible for her to step into the outer darkness.

At times she would change her cry, and ask irritably for some members of her former home, but after Mrs. Billy the person she most frequently desired was Tommy Paulyn. If they had had the heart for laughter then, this would have amused them, but all was too sad, too terrible, with the shadow of death hanging over the house that might perhaps never again be ruled by its mistress. At such times as when

she called upon him, Tommy was always forthcoming, and would sit beside her for hours together, with her poor, wasted hand that seemed only bones now, and too transparent to be beautiful, held gently between both his own. His cousins learned to be very fond of him at this time, and *one* cousin who shared his watches with him learned something more—the greatest knowledge of all.

For Branksmere, his wife never asked. No faintest mention of him crossed her lips. Save for her desire for Mrs. Billy, her memory seemed to have gone back entirely to her earlier days, before the thought of other love than the home one had entered her heart. She babbled of little trivial scenes and girlish gaieties that they had imagined long since forgotten by her; and would talk to, and scold, and laugh at the twins as energetically as though they were really in her presence, and she back once more in the old schoolroom with them. But of Branksmere, nothing!

He would steal in and out of her room all day long, and very often during the night, and stand looking down upon her, in silence, and apparently without emotion. The first day he had seen Tommy Paulyn sitting with her hand in his, he had changed colour slightly, and had left the room somewhat abruptly. But afterwards he showed no sign of having been surprised or offended, and was, indeed, more attentive to Paulyn, and friendlier with him than he had ever been before. The rapt way in which he would stand listening to the idle words that fell from the parched lips, led Margery into the belief that he was hoping for some word that might apply to himself, and it grieved and distressed her beyond measure that such word never came. But perhaps, had she known it, Branksmere's anxiety had been of another order, and the pain he may have felt at finding himself ignored in her ravings had been conquered by the passionate relief he knew in finding that the name most hated by him on earth was also absent from her lips.

The loss of hope is cruel! For two whole days it slipped from them, and even now, to-day, when a little change for the better had been noticed and made much of, still they start and pale, and feel their hearts stop beating whenever a door opens suddenly, believing it to be a message from one of the doctors desiring them to prepare for the last sad change of all.

The weather, too, is dull and mournful, the rain drips

from the eaves, and a sighing of the winds in the pine avenue makes itself felt. All through the sullen afternoon the misty snowflakes melt upon the window panes, and the rushing breeze hurls itself against the casements in the turret chamber where Muriel lies, half slain by the giant enemy that had attacked her. The sounds of Nature enter the sick room in spite of all efforts to defeat them, and rouse the tired patient to a sense of life.

Muriel, wide-eyed but silent, is lying in a weak prostration upon her bed, one hand, damp and nerveless, toying feebly with the sheet. Upon the hearthrug, Margery and Mrs. Billy are conversing in low tones. The fire is burning brightly, sending forth little cheerful noises with a vivacity hardly to be equalled.

'Yes, she is better, quite better,' says Mrs. Billy suddenly, addressing a tall figure standing in the doorway.

Branksmere with a slow step crosses the room, and bending down looks at the pale occupant of the bed. They are so accustomed to his ceaseless comings and goings that the two on the hearthrug continue their conversation as though he had never entered.

Looking, he can see for himself there is more of a steady light in the grey eyes than has been there for many a day. She half looks at him, then lets her lids fall heavily over the orbs beneath. Branksmere is fast losing himself in some gloomy reverie, when the sound of her weak voice coming to him across his dreamings rouses him at once into sudden nervous life. He stoops over her.

'What is it I hear? Birds?' she asks feebly.

In truth some melancholy robins have stationed themselves under the drooping foliage that has covered the window sill outside, and their twitterings have apparently entered into her ear.

'Who feeds them now?' she asks in that strange, slow way that a sickness nigh unto death has taught her. Her eyes—grown frightfully large—are fixed on Branksmere expectantly. Then all at once her glance grows troubled, and her breath comes and goes with a cruel haste and labour.

'Oh, how it all comes back!' she cries faintly. Tears rise and fall over her cheeks. With a feeble effort she covers her face. The warm stinging drops wrung from her soul trickle down through her emaciated fingers, and lose themselves amongst the laces of her nightdress.

'Try to keep your mind from dwelling upon anything that worries you,' entreats Branksmere hurriedly, with all the sound but useless advice of a man, given at such a time. 'Try to forget—all.'

'There is one thing I cannot remember,' breathes she feebly. 'Do you know? Where is *she*?—the woman who wanted to murder me?'

Branksmere, troubled, takes her hand, and holds it fast.

'Try to forget her,' he says, believing she wanders, and fearing to let her mind revert to the stricken Adela. Muriel grows restless.

'I cannot!' The words fall from her in a slow whisper one by one. 'She came into the room while that poor girl was trying to injure me, and she urged her with a laugh to kill me. I can see her now. I see her always.'

'She? Who?' He is somewhat struck by the extreme lucidity of her manner.

'Madame von Thirsk!' She turns her head with difficulty upon her pillow so as to face him, and speaks in a low, jerky fashion, but with strange earnestness. Branksmere grows deadly pale as he hears the name of Madame. He had known truly of the enmity she bore his wife; he knew, too, of the subdued but savage temper she had inherited; but that she should have longed for Muriel's *death*—It was too horrible for belief. Surely Muriel raves—and yet, the clear eye, the steady if weakly accents, the soul that looks at him through every feature—is this raving?

'I saw her,' whispers Muriel, looking beyond him, as though addressing herself rather than him. 'She stood just *there*, as it were. I know the very spot; and she laughed and told that poor mad creature to haste and finish her work, calling out that I was an enemy of Arthur's! Were they both mad? I had forgotten it all, but now it comes back to me.' She stares with widening eyes over his shoulder, as though some vision beyond is displaying itself to her. 'Ah, keep her away!' she cries suddenly, with a return of the old wildness, clutching convulsively at the satin coverlet.

'She shall never again enter these doors—never, never,' says Branksmere hurriedly, who is looking ghastly. He stoops to reassure her more entirely, but she has sunk back amongst her pillows into a quiescent state that is half sleep, half insensibility. She seems tired and worn, but in a

minute or two she opens her eyes again and fixes them on him as though surprised.

'What are you doing here?' she asks irritably.

'I came to see how you were going on.'

'You are always coming. I have felt it through all. But why do you come *now*? There is nothing more to expect. I am getting well. Other people can die; *I* can't.'

The cruel innuendo he passes over in silence.

'That is good news,' he says; 'yes, I think you are better.'

'You do your part admirably,' returns she with a weak attempt at scorn. 'But you have been on duty long enough. I wish, now,' her voice growing feebler, 'you would cease to consider all this attention so necessary.'

She turns from him as well as her poor weak strength will permit her, and he, deeply offended, steps into the background. He had loved her. *How* he had loved her! With all his heart he had given his heart to her, and now—now! There had been no half measures, no reservations, his very whole soul had been given to her for this! A pity for himself—for the miserable being so cruelly defrauded by Fate of that for which he had paid so heavy a price, possesses him at this moment, as he stands motionless, despairing, his eyes on the ground.

He had borne scorn, contempt, hatred; nay, he had forgiven her that for which most men would have spurned her, and yet—

'Are you there?' Her voice, faint and impatient, comes to him and rouses him from his miserable thoughts. Thinking she is calling for one of those who usually sit beside her, he says gently—

'Is it Mrs. Daryl you want?'

'No.'

'Is it—Paulyn?'

'No.'

'Who is it, then?'

'Nobody,' pettishly. She frowns, and then tears born of weakness spring to her eyes. 'I am so thirsty,' she moans miserably, 'and nobody will give me anything to drink. Nobody attends to me. Nobody cares whether I live or die.'

This most unjust accusation once past her lips, touches her own sense of justice so keenly that the poor thing, repenting of her wayward speech, falls a-crying most bitterly. She

makes a feeble effort to push away the cooling drink he holds to her lips, but afterwards, overcome by the craving for liquid of some sort to cool her burning throat, she drinks feverishly of that he gives her.

She leans back exhausted; and presently begins to move her head restlessly from side to side.

'I am so hot—so hot,' she murmurs. Leaning over her, he lifts the pillow on which she is lying with the hope of rendering her more comfortable. To do this he has to pass his arm beneath her neck, and before he can remove it she has fallen back in the exhausted sudden slumber of one recovering from a wasting illness. Seeing she does not stir, he, too, remains motionless, and presently he sees she is indeed asleep. Afraid to move lest he shall wake her, he kneels beside the bed, and tries to believe there is no gladness for him in the knowledge that her head is resting so near his heart.

Margery and Mrs. Billy at an early stage of the proceedings had deliberately turned their backs upon the bed, so that for quite an hour Branksmere kneels there watching his wife's slumbers undisturbed. Once, indeed, Mrs. Billy had come up to him to whisper some unnecessary caution, but in reality to slip a cushion beneath his knees, and after that she and Margery had gone away, leaving him alone with Muriel. When they return it is to find he, too, has fallen asleep. His head is resting on the pillow. Upon his dark lashes lie the traces of tears.

CHAPTER L.

I've wronged thee much, and Heaven has well avenged.

Will no remorse, will no decay,
O memory, soothe thee into peace?

'Not heard it?' says Lord Primrose; 'why, bless me, I thought all the world knew it now. It's to come off in the Spring, and they are both as jolly as sandboys. You'd hardly know Halkett, he looks so altogether gay; and Mrs. Amyot has learned to blush. They were so long making up their minds that—no—no sugar, thanks—not a *scrap*—I'm growing outrageously fat as it is—that people began to regard them as

a sham. But after all, you see, they meant it. It will be the marriage of the season.'

Lady Anne Branksmere had come down to the Castle on the first word of Muriel's illness, to help Mrs. Billy and Margery in the nursing of her; Muriel having shown a strange impatience with the excellent nurse forwarded from town by one of the doctors.

To have Lady Anne at the Castle means to have Lord Primrose too; his residence being situated on the borders of the neighbouring county, about six miles from Branksmere. Certainly he had been attentive *before* her arrival, had been most assiduous in his inquiries as to the way Lady Branksmere was going on, but when Lady Anne arrived upon the stage there was no knowing how often the ugly, pleasant, good-humoured little man would not appear during the day. As regular as clockwork he dropped in in the afternoon—once Lady Branksmere was pronounced out of danger—presumably to ask for her, but in reality to get his tea from Lady Anne's fair, plump hands, and to sun himself in her kindly smiles.

To-day he is smiled upon, not only by her but by Muriel, who is now brought downstairs to the library every afternoon by Tommy Paulyn and Lady Anne, whose fine arms make light of such a burden.

'You don't know, perhaps,' goes on Lord Primrose, 'that Mrs. Amyot is staying with us at present. The Mater is fond of that frivolous little person. So'm I, by the way. Lots of good in her, in my opinion.'

'You would have made a bad judge,' says Muriel smiling faintly. 'Good in everything is what you see.'

'Don't make him vainer than he is,' entreats Lady Anne, with the purely friendly smile that always charms and exasperates him. 'By-the-by, where is Mrs. Amyot's shadow—Mrs. Vyner, I mean, or rather, Lady Bellair?'

'Oddly enough, in the neighbourhood too; or at least will be to-morrow. I met the Adairs, who told me she was coming to them for a few weeks.'

'She's grown awfully tired of the old Colonel, I hear,' says the Hon. Tommy, who happens to be present.

'Yes, by Jove. It appears she won't take him anywhere with her now. Ever since he fell in for the title she's led him no end of a life.'

'One would think she might be grateful for that small mercy.'

'She isn't, though. She has got the whip-hand over him in some unaccountable fashion, and she uses it unsparingly. She is worse to him than a dozen of those native regiments he used to storm about.'

'Naturally,' says Paulyn, 'as *he* had the whip-hand over *them*, and used it unsparingly, too, as I have heard. Then he governed; now he is governed.'

'Poor old Colonel,' laughs Lady Anne.

'Not at all; not at all. If, as they say, "variety is charming," he should now be supremely happy. By-the-by, my mother and Mrs. Amyot, and Halkett, and in fact the lot of 'em, want to come over to see you, Lady Branksmere, as soon as you can permit it, or feel strong enough.'

'I am strong enough this moment. I shall be delighted,' says Muriel. 'Tell your mother so, with my love.'

'But really—so many—you mustn't overdo it, you know,' protests Primrose.

'It will do her good,' decides Lady Anne gaily.

After a little bit Primrose fades away, by imperceptible degrees, following Lady Anne's footsteps, who moves gracefully from the Bohemian vases to the conservatory and back again, and finally coming to a standstill in the flowers' pretty home brings him to a resting point too. Margery and Tommy Paulyn have gone in search of the twins, who have been absent sufficiently long to make everyone sure that now at last they have come to the untimely end they are always courting, and Muriel, left alone, lies back amongst her cushions with a tired sigh, and a vague sense of having missed her place in the world. Nobody wants *her*. She is a bit of useless lumber that ought to be condemned to the attics without delay.

There is a pathos in the impatience with which she lifts her head as Branksmere enters the room.

'I hope you feel better—more yourself,' he says kindly.

'That is the last thing you should hope,' returns she with an ungraciousness born of miserable thought.

'Still,' gently, 'as I do hope it, give me, if you can, the answer I would have.'

'What is it, Branksmere?' asks she suddenly, with a strange, tremulous touch of passion. She lifts herself on her elbow and looks full at him with her great troubled eyes. 'Are you trying to arrange your account with Heaven, that

you thus seek to overburden me with a kindness you *cannot* feel ?'

'It is a pity you look at things with such distorted sight,' returns he. 'I feel for you only kindness. Believe that.'

'Well, I don't!' slowly. 'I have tried to, but it is not possible, I think. Even a small thing—to forget it, is hard—and you, how could *you* forget? Oh, no!' She puts up her hand with a little natural gesture that betokens more fully than words how impossible she believes it would be for him to entirely obliterate from his memory the past.

'What can I do to convince you?' asks he in a tone of sore distress.

'Nothing! And do not try to convince yourself. It will be time thrown away. No man could forgive it. And yet—was it *all* my fault?' cries she with growing excitement. 'If I had known—at first; but I was treated as a child, as a fool might be, and then when it was *too late*—the truth was hurled upon me!'

She sinks back exhausted, and covers her face with her hands.

'The crime was mine; I wronged you,' says Branksmere, gently but hurriedly dropping some perfume into the hollow of his hand, and then pressing the hand against her brow. She does not turn from him. 'I believed time would arrange all things. She had been for so long undiscovered—six years!—that I thought her secret would have died with her. We knew she could not live for many years, as she had an aneurism of the heart that might carry her off at any moment.'

'You trusted to chance. You trusted to everything save me,' exclaims Lady Branksmere, sitting up, and, after a slight effort, rising to her feet. 'You withheld all from me. All! Oh, if you had but spoken! But you were deliberately silent. You refused me a wife's place. You put me from you as though I were a stranger.'

'How could I speak? How could I find it easy to explain, with that solemn oath to the dead upon my soul? And to you of all others?' He pauses. His last words are full of a sad eloquence. What sympathy could he expect from her—from the unloving woman who had withheld from him always even the common sympathy of a friend! 'How could I give voice to my brother's dishonesty—and to you—who

cared nothing for me; who would have received the story with a sneer it might be, or a contemptuous word?’

‘Ah!’ The exclamation is so low that Branksmere fails to hear it, so wrapped up is he in mournful recollection. It is indeed almost a sigh.

‘I feared to speak,’ he goes on hurriedly. ‘I dreaded the thought that you might demand from me the dismissal of that poor creature, and have driven her from the only home she then knew.’

‘Was all that Madame von Thirsk’s teaching?’ asks Muriel, cold and pale. ‘Am I so poor a thing that I have not even common pity in me? That I have lowered myself in your esteem I know; but at least grant me some human feeling!’

There is a passion of despair in her voice.

‘Do not speak to me like that,’ says Branksmere. ‘You are as high as ever in my esteem. I remember indeed, but——’

‘As high as ever?’ interrupts she. ‘Is that true? At least, when you married me no one could cast a stone at me—and now! Though actually guiltless, in your secret soul do you not condemn me?’

‘No.’ The assurance comes steadily from his lips. Laying his hands upon her shoulders he presses her back into her seat. ‘This excitement is bad for you,’ he says, ‘and but that I know dwelling silently on this unhappy subject is worse, I would not permit it. Now, hear me! I knew even when you consented to marry me that your heart was not mine, but yet I trusted—I hoped——Well, never mind that!’ hastily. ‘At all events, I believed myself satisfied to take the risk. I knew you did not love me. What I did *not* know’—with the first touch of an impassioned reproach in his tone—‘was that you loved—another!’

‘There you are wrong,’ cries she eagerly. ‘I cared for him—I *swear* it, Branksmere—as little as I cared—for you.’ The words are bitter, yet they contain for him a whole world of sweetness.

‘You say that! yet you were willing to go with—him! To abandon me, who, however unsuited to you as you might think, had surely the first claim on you. Your words’—regarding her with a glance of agonised uncertainty—‘do not tally with your actions.’

‘You forget the provocation!’ returns she steadily, but

in a voice that is growing more and more fatigued. 'There was no love in me for you or him, but there was something stronger that *you* created—the longing for revenge. You had (as I believed) flung me from my rightful place, and planted another there. I was nothing to you. You would willingly have seen me out of your way; whilst he—(I was mad if you like, but I would have staked every hope I had upon it *then*) loved me. Great Heaven! what folly it was; what a fool I have been all through!'

'If you think that—if you are *sure*—there still might——'

'No—no.'—She interrupts him passionately, putting up her hands as though to ward him off. Then in a calmer tone—'Let that thought be dead between us for ever!'

Branksmere, thus repulsed, draws back from her, and leaning his arm upon the mantel-piece gazes moodily into the fire.

The minutes pass slowly, awkwardly, and then at last Muriel breaks the silence that has become almost unbearable.

'Does Lady Anne know?' she asks, in a subdued tone that somehow suits the moment.

'She is entirely ignorant.' He does not lift his eyes as he answers her, but continues his moody gaze into the fire. 'Everything was carefully concealed from her.'

'She and I are in the same boat, then. We have been kept, both of us, most cruelly in the dark. And why? Were we not women, with hearts—with——'

'*She* was! That is why I decided upon hiding from her her husband's falsity.'

'And I am not! Is that your insinuation? It is very bitter, Branksmere, but it is only just. *You* should indeed be the one to scorn me. But I am sick of myself. It is of Anne I would now hear. You say you concealed all from her, as from me. Did it ever occur to you that there might be too much secrecy? Do you know'—with some swift vehemence—'that but for all this diplomacy of yours she might have married years ago a good man—a man who not only truly loves her but is worthy of her love?'

'I don't know what you mean,' says Branksmere, who in truth has paid little attention to Lord Primrose and his wooing. 'Is there someone who——'

'There is Primrose. I tell you there has been too much concealment in this matter. Have you not noticed? Have you seen nothing? Primrose is devoted to her, and but for a

foolish clinging to the memory of a man who was false to her, Anne would have given him not only her hand but her heart long ago.'

'But are you positive? Is there no doubt? You may, perhaps——'

'If you refuse to set this affair straight, I shall,' declares she quickly. 'What! Is everything to be sacrificed to a most ignoble memory? I am bound by no vows to the dead; I shall speak, even though you withhold permission.'

'I do not withhold it,' says Branksmere gently, seeing how flushed and exhausted she looks. 'Do as you think best about it, but spare my brother's name as far as you can. I ask this for Anne, for his *wife's* sake, not for mine.'

'Then I have your permission?,' asks she. 'Well,' with a sudden gentleness, 'I am better with it than without it.'

CHAPTER LI.

No lesse was she in secret heart affected.

.

'Ah! Lady Branksmere—alone?' says Primrose, in his usual airy fashion, as he enters the drawing-room about a week later. 'That speaks well for your strength, eh?'

'It is hardly kind now to remind me I ever was an invalid. I have almost forgotten it,' returns she, smiling and pointing to a low chair near her lounge. 'Anne has gone to the Manor to carry a little commission to Mrs. Daryl: and Margery is, I dare say, arranging with Curzon how they are to live on nothing a year.' There is no callousness in this speech, only a sort of tender amusement.

'I heard of Bellew's loss. I don't know when I was more sorry for anything, especially when I was told of pretty Miss Margery's decision. Yet they are not altogether to be pitied; they have love on their side,' says Primrose, in his quaint way. 'But they will be rather out of the etceteras of life, I am afraid.'

'I am afraid so, too. In spite of anything I can do, I am afraid so,' says Muriel, a deeper shadow falling into her eyes. 'However, there is still a chance for them.' She sighs quickly, and throws from her with a swift sigh the subject of Margery.

Anne's married life than love. Duty too (a very strained duty as it seems to me) has made her faithful to his memory. But I will confess to you that when the first communication—the surprise, the awakening—was at an end, relief was the principal expression on her charming face.' She looks up at him and laughs kindly. 'It is charming, is it not?' she asks archly.

'To be a just judge one should be impartial.' Then he comes over to her, and taking her hand lifts it to his lip. 'Whatever happens after this,' he says, 'I shall never forget your kindness of to-day.'

'Is that Anne's footstep?' asks Lady Branksmere rising on her elbow. 'She has gone into the southern morning room, I think. She is fond of that weird old chamber. Should I be troubling you very much, Lord Primrose, if I asked you to bring me word as to whether she did, or did not, see Wilhelmina?'

As Primrose hurries to the door, only too anxious to obey this kindly command, she calls to him—

'Do not be in hot haste to bring me an answer,' she says smiling; 'I am tired. I shall try for my forty winks now I have successfully disposed of you. But bring Anne back here with you for tea, if all goes well.'

Anne is marching up and down the southern chamber as Primrose enters it, her soft cheeks aflame, and an unwonted fire in her mild eyes.

'Poor little wretch!' she breathes warmly, staring at Primrose, 'to think he should have been so neglected—so ill-treated—and all in one day.'

'Oh, no!' says Primrose meekly, 'there have been many days.'

'Pshaw! I am thinking of my bird,' cries she. 'He was almost dead for the sake of a little water when I came in. Servants! what are they made for, I wonder?'

'For our discomfort,' soothingly.

'You grow sensible at last!' breaking into a little laugh. 'But my poor bird! Just think how he has suffered!'

'Alas! how kind you are to all the world—to even its dumb things—save me,' says Primrose with a determined sigh.

'You are not dumb, at all events. You sing your sorrow overmuch, it seems to me.'

'Not overmuch; they are too great for that. And if I

keep silence they would not be heard at all,' after which he joins her in her laughter, glad at heart to see how blithe she can be in spite of those tidings so crushing to her self-love, of which Lady Branksmere has assured him she is now in full possession. To speak now or never, to strike while the iron is hot, becomes a fixed idea with him. With the words almost on his lips that he intends to say, he turns to her, but is forestalled in his intention.

'It is a most uncomfortable world,' declares Lady Anne, before he has time to speak. She has sunk into a chair upon the hearthrug, and is gazing gloomily at the fire, which in truth has fallen rather low.

'Still there are moments'—begins he in a deprecatory tone.

'Not many;' still staring at the waning fire.

'You take a too despairing view of it, I think,' says Primrose earnestly. Evidently she has taken the news of her husband's treachery very much to heart. 'And considering the time——'

'That is what I am considering,' interrupts she. 'Have you forgotten,' with a glance full of the liveliest reproach, 'that this is the month of November?'

Primrose racks his brain. Was this then the month in which her 'poor Arthur' came to such an untimely end? He cannot remember.

'What I mean is,' he says, stammering a little, 'that time brightens all things.'

'Eh?' She looks puzzled. 'I don't believe it,' she declares at last.

'Sure to, if people will only let well alone.'

'You are all in favour of letting it alone.' Again she looked perplexed. 'Now, I am not. I think,' with some force, 'there is nothing like a good stirring up.'

'Good Heavens! Are you bent on raking up all——'

'No! For the simple reason,' with a disconsolate glance at the nearly empty fireplace, 'that there is so little to rake.'

Now this is taking a much more reasonable view of the matter.

'I entirely agree with you,' says Primrose nervously. 'In my opinion there is nothing like letting things die out.'

'Die out?' She regards him with some severity. 'I really believe you are trying to make me even more wretched than I am.'

'You know me better than that!' softly. 'You must know how I feel for and with you. But—consider—would you have it always before you?'

'Certainly,' says Lady Anne, with decision. She seems a little disgusted. 'You must be a person of a singularly warm temperament,' she continues with an approach to scorn.

'Warm enough, at least, to make me long to comfort you, if that be possible. You seem very depressed,' gazing at her with deep solicitude. 'Is there anything that I can do for you?'

'Yes,' says Lady Anne. 'And I think you might have done it before without all this tiresome preamble.'

'Tell me how I can serve you,' cries he eagerly, growing hope in his eyes. 'All my life, as you well know, is at your disposal; and if——'

'Well, then, just ring the bell for coals, will you,' says she, turning once more with a shiver to the dying fire. 'As I said before, it is a most uncomfortable world.'

'Anne!' calling her by the more familiar appellation in his chagrin, 'do you mean to tell me you have been talking of that—er—confounded fire all this time?'

'Why, what were *you* talking of?' demands she in turn, staring at him.

'Of—that is—look here,' mumbles he nervously, 'you have heard about Arthur, haven't you?'

'Oh, was that it!' thoughtfully. Her brows contract, and she looks distressed and a little forlorn. 'I had forgotten it for the moment,' she says wearily.

'Don't try to forget it,' advises he gently, persuasively. 'It would be impossible, don't you know; but rather let me help you to remember it with—er—equanimity. After all, he was never worthy of you, and——'

'And you think you are?' letting her eyes rest on him with a reflective regard.

'Not altogether! But I think I might be so in time,' says he, being a very honest lover.

There is a short pause.

'Well, so do I,' says Lady Anne frankly, holding out to him her hand. 'And to do you only bare justice, Primrose, I don't think time is required. I think,' with a sudden beautiful softening of the eyes, 'you are worthy of a far better woman even now.'

This swift and sweet surrender takes him by storm. The colour springs to the little man's cheeks.

'Why should I dispute so foolish a speech?' he says lifting her hand to his lips. 'You know, Anne, what I think of you. That your compeer is not to be met with upon earth.'

CHAPTER LII.

Our happiness in this world depends on the affections we are enabled to inspire.

.
And then, then only when we love we live!
.

ALL the world outside is white with snow. The branches hang low because of it; the berries of the brilliant hollies are so far covered that only a little touch of scarlet here and there can be seen. Muriel, stretched upon her couch, watches with a lazy interest a tiny robin with its pretty crimson breast, that hops ever and ever nearer to the crumbs she has placed upon the sill outside the window, close to which she is lying. It must be a new robin, a trembling, nervous little stranger, because those who have visited her during the past month are now so tame as to have grown over bold. There had come even a day when they had pecked loudly at her window pane, as though to demand the dainties she had forgotten to place for them.

The winds are sighing piteously. Ever and anon they dash themselves against the sashes, as though they would fain enter the cosy, firelit room, with its delicate satin trappings of rose and chocolate, and its subtle perfume that suggests a raid having been made by someone upon the winter houses.

Feeling a little tired and spiritless, Lady Branksmere had refused to go to the library to-day, but had instead ensconced herself in her boudoir, and surrounded by periodicals had elected to sleep and read away the afternoon. It is pretty far spent now, and tired of her reading, Muriel has sunk back on her couch, and closed her eyes with, perhaps, a faint hope that sleep may visit her.

The room is warm, the scent of the flowers seductive.

She has grown presently so drowsy that the opening of the door, though she hears it, fails to rouse her to a more open declaration of wakefulness.

Whoever it is who enters, stands irresolutely upon the threshold of this, her own particular sanctum, as though uncertain as to whether he shall enter or retire, and yet evidently unwilling to go. Probably inclination conquers, because after a moment's pause he comes on tiptoe to the fireplace, and under the mistaken impression that its mistress is asleep, seats himself cautiously in a huge arm-chair.

It is a glorious arm-chair, soft and roomy, and caressing. Lord Branksmere has not been in it many minutes when, overcome by the influence of the fire and the seduction of the atmosphere, he falls into a sound sleep.

Had he dreams? Were they rose-coloured? Did—did someone (alas! how unlikely a someone!) come to his side and bend over him, and brush back with gentle fingers the dark hair (of late so subtly touched with grey) from his forehead? If his dreams were such, they were evidently unfounded, because when he wakes presently with a start the room is as still as ever, and Muriel is lying over there as mute, as motionless, as when he entered. By-the-by it is as well she hadn't waked to find him slumbering here within her own special den. She would hardly have been gracious to so decided an outsider. He smiles bitterly to himself as he thinks this, and rising to his feet, creeps as he came, on tiptoe to the door.

Being a man (poor creature!) he is of course clumsy, and his creeping this time results in the fall of a little cranky-legged chair against a spider table crammed with china. Some of this china most unkindly comes with a crash to the floor. It isn't much of a crash, but it apparently wakes its owner.

'Who is there?' asks Muriel sitting up suddenly, and blinking in a rather more sleepy fashion than a sleepy person really would.

'It is I' Branksmere,' returns that individual confusedly. 'There, it isn't broken,' he says, picking the ugly little cup off the carpet. 'I'm sorry I disturbed you, and of course I ought to apologise for my intrusion here, but finding you asleep I thought I'd wait—and—er——'

'But you didn't wait! Where are you going now?' demands she querulously, seeing he is making for the door.

Nowhere in particular. More for a short stroll before dinner than anything else. If you dislike being alone, however, shall I send——'

'No one! If,' fractionally, 'you won't stay, I should rather be alone.'

She turns away her head and buries it rebelliously in the cushions.

Branksmere flushes crimson.

'Me! Do you want *me* to stay?' he asks.

'Oh, of course I don't. I only desire to be left in peace,' cries she impatiently.

Branksmere, drawing a low chair beside her couch, seats himself deliberately upon it.

'Don't stick your nose into the cushions in that ridiculous way,' he says in his usual brusque fashion, 'but turn round, and explain to me what it is you really desire.'

A low sound escapes her. She lifts her head and makes a slight movement in his direction, and then sinks back again as if exhausted.

'I feel so tired—so tired,' she breathes fretfully, wearily, her eyes filling with tears as she acknowledges the fatigue that is overpowering her.

'You haven't had your sherry and quinine—that's it,' declares he, springing to his feet and bringing it to her. 'Now, sit up and drink it.'

'No,' turning away distastefully. 'I hate it.'

'That isn't of the least consequence,' coldly, 'you must take it. So come. No, don't do that! You must, you know.'

He holds down the impatient hand she has raised.

'Must I?' repeats she, with a little feeble exhibition of determination. 'Well, let us see!'

'To please me, then,' says Branksmere, roused to genius by his anxiety. He could have sunk into the ground when the words have passed his lips, but he has not time for false shame before the remarkable results of his speech display themselves.

Muriel, when she has stared at him for a long minute, drops her eyes, and, taking the medicine from his hand, swallows it without another word.

'It is abominable,' she says then, pushing him and the glass away from her and sinking back upon her couch. She speaks harshly, as though with an anxiety to reassert herself,

and to destroy the suspicion of weakness her compliance might have possibly given rise to in his mind.

'It will be, I hope, only a passing disagreeability. You will soon be able to give it up,' says Branksmere. Then he pauses, and looks at her with a sudden intensity. His face pales as he nerves himself to say what for some time has lain heavy on his mind. 'You do not grow stronger,' he exclaims, blurting it out at last in a rather spasmodic fashion.

'No,' she smiles. 'You, too, see that?' She stretches out her arms with a gesture of relief. 'I am glad of it,' she breathes softly. 'It is the best thing that could happen for both you and me.'

'What is?' sharply.

'My death! I can't tell you,' her voice sinking to an exultant whisper, 'how very, *very* much weaker I have felt to-day and yesterday. It will be consumption, I suppose, and a rapid one, I hope.'

Branksmere, who has not recovered his colour, regards her keenly.

'You are wrong in one particular,' he says slowly. 'In spite of all that has come and gone, I should not consider it the best thing for me.'

'That shows your folly,' with a frown.

'Probably. Yet I would not wish myself wiser in that matter. And why should things be always between us as they are to-day? Consider. Life is short, shall we waste it? If, in the future, you could come to regard me as——'

'No, no!' with a burst of passionate vehemence, shrinking from him, though he has not attempted to touch her. 'Put that out of your head at once and for ever. What! Do you imagine you could be sincere in such a wish? Do not act the hypocrite, Branksmere! Shun that ignoble part.'

She sits up on her couch, and lifting one hand, presses back the loosened hair from her white brow. She looks pale and haggard, and the great hollows beneath her eyes give those lovely features a depth that adds to their brilliancy. She is looking subdued, but very beautiful in spite of the fever that still lurks within her veins, and the crushing memories that keep her low, and——

The passions and the cares that wither life,
And waste its little hour.

'I am no hypocrite, as you well know,' returns Branks-

mere with meaning. 'But with *you* how is it? Do *you* conceal nothing—hide away no desire in your inmost heart of which the world must not dream? You should think twice, coldly, 'before you accuse me of hypocrisy!'

'You mean——?' demands she with stormy eyes.

'I wish I could tell you even half that I mean,' declares he, rising to his feet and beginning to pace the floor with uneven strides. 'Will nothing ever deaden that memory within you? Must you always know regret? And *such* a regret!'

'You forget yourself,' says Muriel. Her tone is cold. She is trembling from head to foot.

'That is true,' cries he vehemently. 'I forget all. I remember only you.'

'Forget me, then!' Her tone is full of an anger that is more than half melancholy. 'Blot me out of your remembrance. It is the one thing I most earnestly desire. Oh!' she clasps her hands together and looks full at him with eyes wide and anguished. 'Oh, that I could be sure that your thoughts *never* dwelt on me!'

'You cannot be sure of that,' says Branksmere doggedly.

'Is this my punishment? Would you compel me to be for ever before you—knowing you were remembering? See here,' she cries in an impassioned tone, holding out her arms to him with a gesture full of entreaty. 'Let me go! It is all I ask. After all, I doubt my chance with Death. For once he may show the most mistaken mercy, and instead of killing me may leave me here to a thing far worse than his embrace. Oh, Branksmere, think! Think! The shame of it—it is *the shame* of it that is destroying me. Let me go.'

'You would have a formal separation! That is impossible,' replies he, in a low tone. 'Do not hope for that; I will not submit to it.'

'Then you shall take the consequences,' cries she wildly. 'I swear I will not live here day by day with all the hateful, the shameful past for ever before me. Have you no pity, none? Can you not see what it means to me? Or are you deaf and blind to all my misery?'

'You would leave me, then?'

'For ever. Can I go?' with trembling eagerness. 'When may I go?'

'This is your second effort to leave me,' says Branksmere calmly. Then all at once his studied quiet leaves him, he goes quickly to her, and laying his hand upon her arm, turns

her where the light can fall more fully upon her face. 'So you would desert me *for ever*? For ever! that is what you say. Is all my care of no avail? Does my silence count for nothing, my patience, my for——' he checks himself.

'Your forbearance?' coldly. 'Yes; you have been forbearing. Do you think I forget? Oh, that I *could*!'

'If you could, I should be the first thing cast aside?' His tone is a question.

'That is only the bare truth,' returns she icily.

He lays his hands upon her shoulders, and bending her a little from him looks into her face.

'Are you human?' he asks huskily. 'Have you no feeling? Great Heaven!' pushing her away and then as suddenly laying his hand upon her arm and drawing her back to him, as if to read her very heart. 'How deadly cruel you beautiful women can be!'

'Let me go,' she says in a tone dangerously low. He loosens his grasp at once, and she steps backward feebly, laying her hand upon the chair nearest her as if to steady herself.

'Am I so abhorrent to you that my very touch can bring such a look into your face?' demands Branksmere with a frown.

The excitement and the agitation are telling on her terribly. She is trembling from head to foot.

'Go!' she says faintly, pointing to the door.

'No, I shall not go,' returns he with a settled determination. As though to strengthen his resolve he seats himself. 'Let us come to the root of this matter. You desire a life altogether apart from me. Why?'

'I have already explained,' replies she sullenly.

'To escape from a past that is known to you and me alone; to obtain a freedom that will leave you open to the world's cruellest innuendoes. A woman separated from her husband very seldom gains a martyr's crown in this life. Be reasonable, I entreat you.'

'You misunderstand——'

'On the contrary. I understand you well enough. You desire leisure to brood over your griefs, to spend in vain regret not for what you have wilfully resigned but *for what you have lost*.'

'It is folly to waste insults on me. I am too poor a foe for that,' returns she coldly. 'I have already told you that regrets of the kind you hint at are unknown to me.' She moves

her head languidly and looks at him. 'If I might be alone,' she says, speaking as if with difficulty, 'or must I leave the——'

With an impatient gesture Branksmere goes by her towards the door. He has reached it, when suddenly, as if compelled to it, he comes back to her, and taking her in his arms strains her to his breast with an almost convulsive clasp.

'You don't love me—I know that,' he says in a stifled tone, 'but swear to me before Heaven that you love no other man.'

'I swear it,' says Lady Branksmere, overcome by the agony in his voice.

'Not,' gazing fixedly and suspiciously at her, 'that devil!'

'Oh, no, no, no!' She shudders violently.

Once again he presses her passive form to his heart, and then with quivering lips and sombre eyes looks down at her. Her eyes are lowered; her features are still as marble.

'Pah!' he says, pushing her almost roughly from him. 'You have a heart of ice! You are not worth it all!'

He strides towards the door. He has gained it—opened it—is on the threshold—when a low cry breaks from her.

'Stay, stay, Branksmere!' she calls aloud in a wild, impassioned tone.

Closing the door, he returns to her side slowly, as one amazed, and awaits in silence her explanation. She struggles desperately for self-possession, and then—all at once, as it were—bursts into a storm of tears; a storm so heavy that it seems to tear her frail body and shake it to its very centre.

'It is nothing!' she sobs vehemently. 'Oh! you should not stay because I ask you. You should go. Why should you obey any request of mine? I must be mad to call to you at all. But I could not let you go believing me altogether heartless. I am not that. Ah! if time could only be given to me over again; if these last hateful months could be wiped from the tablet of my life, how different all might be.'

'The months of your married life?' asks he with an ominous calm in look and tone.

'Yes.'

'What madness possesses you to talk to me like this?' exclaims he suddenly. 'Are you determined to defy me to the last? Have you no fear?'

'What is there left to fear?' asks she mournfully. 'My own hopes, your goodwill—all I have bartered. If these dead months I speak of had never been, you might still——' She

breaks off abruptly, and glances at him in a half frightened, nervous fashion.

'I might *what?*' demands he eagerly. His manner has entirely changed; the hidden wrath has been conquered—a deep anxiety has taken its place.

'Do not pursue the subject. It is useless to go into it now. The past is ever with me; there is no escaping it, and the future is a void from which I shrink.'

'Nevertheless, tell me.'

She makes a negative gesture with her hand. It seems as though she is afraid to speak, lest words bring with them tears once more.

'Do not repulse me, I implore you,' entreats he, laying his hand upon her arm. 'Speak—say what was on your mind—what was on your lips just now!'

Impressed by the solemnity of his address, she struggles with herself, and at last some words fall from her.

'If time could roll backwards; if this could be again the year when first I saw you; if you could be once more my lover—not my husband——' She stops dead short, as though to go farther, to enter into explanation, to terminate her sentence, is beyond her.

'I am your lover now, as I was then—as I shall be always,' says Branksmere in a low but steady tone. The words have hardly passed his lips when he has to go quickly to her assistance. The colour has fled from her lips; she sways helplessly, and but that he catches her in his arms she would have fallen.

CHAPTER LIII.

'Tis death to me to be at enmity.

LIFTING her, he lays her gently on the fur-covered lounge, and bending over her gazes with a terrible anxiety upon her face, that is now as pale as though death has already claimed her for his own. Her beautiful limbs stretched nerveless upon the couch show no sign of life; the purple lines beneath the closed lids throw out more clearly the marble pallor of the cheeks below.

If she has fainted, however, it is an insensibility of but short duration. Presently she uplifts the heavy lids, and sighing gently, moves her tired head from side to side. Sit-

ting down by her, Branksmere gently chafes her hand, and after a little induces her to take a glass of champagne he has procured from Bridgman.

After five minutes or so have gone by in absolute silence, Muriel suddenly turns her eyes full upon him. There is in them the fretful reproach of one who is either very ill or very unhappy.

'These pillows!' she says petulantly. 'Oh! how they make my head ache.'

'Let me settle them;' softly as though consoling a little weary child, he speaks. He raises the pillows, and is still arranging them, so that she must know comfort, when her head falls back as if exhausted. Her eyes close, and Branksmere, fearing she has again fainted, does not dare to stir, hardly indeed dares to breathe, while she lies there resting unconsciously within his arms. It reminds him of that first day after her great illness when he had in such wise supported her; but then she had been *indeed* unaware of his presence. Now—— His heart beats quickly. Stooping to examine more minutely the lovely wasted face, he sees that she has recovered herself, and that two tears have forced themselves under her long lashes. She is sensible, yet she has not withdrawn herself from his encircling arm!

The tears slowly, very slowly, travel down the wan lines of her face, but her eyes go up to his.

'How good you are to me!' she breathes brokenly. She lifts the hand that is round her neck, and drawing it still more tightly round her presses the fingers to her lips. A thrill runs through Branksmere. Now, *at last*, when despair has seemed his portion, is life, hope, joy coming to him?— 'But you must not say such things to me. *My lover!* Alas! all such times are gone for me. I am an outsider, a creature with no interests, and in whom no one finds interest. There are moments,' she says with a pathetic attempt at calm that strikes him as being specially mournful, 'when I feel the loneliness of it—the desire for something beyond—something irrecoverable.'

'Muriel, do not turn from me. Look at me. When I used that word I meant it. Your lover. I am your lover now, even now.' His face has blanched, his tone is sharp and impassioned.

'All that is folly,' cries she excitedly, rising on her elbow. 'You would be something more than human to forgive what

has happened. It is *impossible*, I tell you.' She draws her breath with an uncertain violence, as though deeply agitated. Her eyes meet his; suddenly she covers her face with her hands. 'Oh,' cries she with a wild inconsistency, 'if it *might* be possible. If I might dare believe——'

'Believe this, at least, Muriel, that I love you.'

'You could not love—remembering.'

'I could—because I do.'

'What! Nay, Branksmere, why should you perjure yourself to please a dying woman. Think, dwell on all that has occurred, and tell me if you can still hold to your words.'

'Do you imagine I have *not* thought? And yet—I love you. To forget is not within the reach of any man; and though every smallest detail of your—error—here his voice falls—' is fresh within my memory, I still swear to you that you, and no other woman upon earth, can call my heart her own.'

'And if——'

'You think me weak, perhaps? Is that my reward? Other men might condemn what you have done, but I must be different from my fellows, because I see no fault in you. I have forgiven all. I would—if only you would let me—raise you to the very highest throne in my affections.'

His dark eyes, large and eager, seek hers, and meet them. What he sees there sends a swift flush into his cheek.

'Ah, my day has come then,' he cries with vehement exultation. 'I have waited, but I have won.' He takes her face between his hands, and gazes intently into it. 'You will love me Muriel? Is that what your eyes say? Is that what your blush means? Is that what your lip would utter? Oh, my beloved, for once let your lips speak the real truth to me of their own accord.'

He leans over her, nearer, nearer still. Their breaths mingle, coming swiftly through their parted lips, their eyes grow to each other, there is one wild tremulous movement, and then they are in each other's arms, heart to heart at last, with all save love forgotten!

The sound of footsteps echoing through the corridor without, rouses them at last to a sense of everyday life. There is a subdued colloquy outside the door, and Bridgman, having taken the salver from the footman, brings it in and hands some cards to Muriel.

'Lady Primrose, Mrs. Amyot, Lady Bellair,' she reads this much aloud to show Bridgman she is her usual calm self and then breaks down and rather mumbles over the others.

'You can't receive them; it will be too much for you,' says Branksmere tenderly, when Bridgman has retired. 'I'll take an excuse, if you will.'

'Tired, no. I feel strong, *well!*' cries she, rising brightly—if a little slowly—to her feet; 'you have given me fresh life.'

There is something in her new-born gaiety that reminds him of Margery. In a moment, as it were, she has blossomed into a brilliant creature, hitherto unknown, unsuspected: the great soft light that is illuminating her eyes is altogether strange to him. 'I should *like* to see them,' she says eagerly. 'I can give them a real welcome to-day. I feel friendly towards all the world.' Stopping short suddenly, and laying her hands on Branksmere's arms—'What a different woman I am now! Do you think they will know me, recognise me?' she asks.

'I should recognise you,' returns he tenderly, raising her arms and inducing her to lay them round his neck. 'All these gone sad months you have not been my Muriel, but now she has come to me. But, sweetheart, consider. All this excitement, is it good for you?'

'Very good,' smiling; and in truth, a faint warm colour has stolen into her cheeks, and reddened her pale lips. 'Come! she holds out her hand to him as she walks to the door.

All at once she pauses, and lifting her hands to her auburn head, looks at him anxiously.

'Shall I do? Is my hair all right?' she asks him anxiously. There is something in the confidential glance and tone that convinces him more than all that has gone before that she is indeed his own.

'Oh, darling! To think it is all true!' he says somewhat irrelevantly, but out of the very fulness of his heart.

CHAPTER LIV.

A woman who wants a charitable heart wants a pure mind.

Hail! holy love, thou word that sums all bliss.

'**HERE** she is,' cries Margery gaily, as Muriel, followed by Lord Branksmere, enters the room. 'So glad!' she whispers lightly to Mrs. Billy, who with Lady Anne has been entertaining everybody.

They all rise in a body to receive the beautiful invalid and

to give her, in fact, a gentle ovation. But she looks so unlike the orthodox thing—so brilliant, so fresh, so full of life, that surprise after a while seizes hold upon them.

‘By Jove, you know,’ says Halkett, who has run down from town for a day or two to be near his bride-elect, ‘I never saw such a transformation in my life; I wish I could catch that fever.’

‘Don’t,’ whispers Mrs. Vyner, now Lady Bellair, who is near him, in her little caustic whisper; ‘one fever at a time is surely enough—and yours is bad.’

Mrs. Billy has pressed Muriel into an arm-chair close to old Lady Primrose, whose cork-screw ringlets are a trifle more pronounced than usual, owing to the fact that her maid has pushed the poor old thing’s front more forward than is desirable. But Lady Primrose, providentially unaware of this, is in her most amiable mood, and having embraced Muriel warmly, has fallen (through the heat of her affections possibly) into a comfortable doze.

‘Muriel, what has happened?’ asks Mrs. Billy, leaning over the old lady’s slumbering form.

‘All that you, my best friend, could desire,’ returns Lady Branksmere softly.

Lady Bellair having at last managed a *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Amyot (who, in a measure, has seemed to avoid her ever since her entrance), now sinks into a low seat near that lately affianced dame, and opens fire without delay.

‘So you were afraid to tell me,’ she says, with a malicious smile.

‘Afraid!’ repeats Mrs. Amyot with the absurdest assumption of ignorance, that sets the other laughing.

‘It is really true, then?’

‘Is what true?’

‘The horrible report I have heard about you.’ She throws so much mystery into this remark that Mrs. Amyot gets off the line, and wanders into an unsound belief that it is nothing so respectable as a report about her approaching marriage that has shocked Lady Bellair.

‘About me,’ she says, frowning slightly. ‘What! is your last bit of scandal, then, about your friend? Has it come to that, Louisa?’

‘It has,’ declares Louisa tragically, who is delighted with the turn affairs have taken; ‘not that I believe it. I don’t myself think you could be guilty of it.’

'That is so good of you! We all know what that kindly assurance means. Not only that you *do* believe the lie, but that you are rejoiced in your heart that you can do so. Well! speak. Let me hear about this terrible "it."'

'If you compel me to mention it,' demurely, 'of course I must. But before I speak, be so good as to remember that I have exonerated you in my own mind.'

'Oh, never mind your mind,' says Mrs. Amyot impatiently. 'It was never anything worth talking about.'

'Well, but——'

'Will you go on?' angrily.

'I am so afraid you will be annoyed.'

'Put that fear in your pocket. I am annoyed already, and it doesn't seem to have done you much harm, or hastened your slander. Come, what is it?'

'Hear, then, if you will, what people are saying about it. They actually have spread it all over town that you—are—going to be—*married*!'

Mrs. Amyot leans back in her chair, and gives way to subdued but vehement merriment. Lady Bellair does quite as much of it inwardly, but not a muscle of her face betrays the fact.

'Oh, Nan!' she says reproachfully. 'It is a wicked story I know, but I think you might ease my mind by denying it.'

'The world will be a blank to me, Louisa, when I lose you,' declares Mrs. Amyot at last. 'You are a sort of harmless laughing gas, so far as I am concerned. Well—I'm glad you don't take my news worse.'

'You acknowledge it, then, without blushing?'

'Why should I blush—at my age?'

'Because of your age! You, whom I believed above the weakness of your sex! You, who had lost and regained freedom to deliberately fling it away again! There must be madness in your veins.'

'I don't look at it in your light.'

'Evidently not. At least, not now. But after?'

'Never!' returns Mrs. Amyot, with force gathered from a glance just gained from Halkett's eyes.

'Besotted fool!' murmurs Lady Bellair in a mournful tone. 'Can naught be done to save thee?'

'Now do you mean to tell me,' begins Mrs. Amyot, turning to her in a brisk way, 'that if Lord Bellair were to—to deprive

us eternally of his society, you know—that you would never marry again?’

‘Catch me at it!’ says Lady Bellair, with more promptitude than elegance. ‘If such an outrageous bit of luck were to fall my way I should know better than that. But it won’t,’ dismally. ‘Fancy your imagining I should trust any man again after the mean, the disgraceful way Bellair is behaving.’

‘What has he done now?’

‘Nonsense, my dear. The question is an insult. He must have known that I married him in the full conviction that he would have the decency to drop off the instant he came in for the title. It is now fully six months since old Lord Bellair made room for him, and yet up to this he has declined to move on. Why, he is as lively as a cricket and worse tempered than ever. There is no chance for me, you see, because he looks with scorn upon tobacco, regards brandy as an abomination, goes to bed as regular as clockwork at ten o’clock, rises at a healthful hour, I am told, and, in fact, eschews all methods of dying.’

‘I wonder if you mean all you say?’

‘Now don’t give yourself airs just because you are going to marry your own true love, as you *think*,’ says Lady Bellair, with a contemptuous grin. ‘Mean it? Rather! And only this morning he told me he never felt so brisk or so lively for years, and quite looked as if he expected me to be *glad* about it. Glad! Do you call that being like a gentleman? It’s downright low in my opinion.’

‘Here he is,’ whispers Mrs. Amyot in a subdued tone.

‘Ah, you!’ cries the fair Louisa, drawing her flounces aside as if to make room for him on the lounge beside her with the prettiest air of welcome imaginable. ‘Is it not charming to see our dear Lady Branksmere so altogether her adorable self once more? That gown, too; what a success—and the colour of it. Somebody must have invented it for her. Schalt, I shouldn’t wonder; isn’t she delicious?’

‘Don’t know, I’m sure,’ growls the new old Earl gruffly as he passes. ‘Never took a bite out of her.’

‘Darling old thing!’ murmurs his wife, apostrophising his vanishing back for the benefit of Mrs. Amyot, after which she puts her face behind her fan and laughs immoderately.

‘Somebody told me you never took him anywhere with you now; that you had by some lucky chance got him well under your control, and kept him there.’

'If you mean that I keep him at home as a rule, you are right. You can see for yourself he is not to be trusted abroad without a keeper; his temper is so infinitely stronger than he is. I was weak enough to consent to his accompanying me here to-day—he heard Lady Primrose was to be here, and wished to see her—old flame of his I shouldn't wonder—about the same century, eh?—and now you see what has been the result of my leniency. Dissipation disagrees with him, and brings out all his nasty points. But I'm so good-natured! I am sure it will be my ruin. Believe me, home is the best place for him. "Exempt from public haunt" he can't do much mischief at all events.'

'Who is talking of mischief?' asks Halkett drawing near, and looking as affectionately at his betrothed as decency will permit.

'I was,' says Lady Bellair. 'I can't bear mischievous people; can you?'

'I can—some of them,' returns he with an expressive glance at her.

'You are like me,' returns she unabashed. 'Too good-hearted by half. Well! this is a cheap day, if you like. I don't know when I have been so entertained as I have been during the past hour by Nan.'

This of course means that she has been listening to unlimited scandal, and Halkett casts a reproachful glance at his beloved.

'Oh, yes! She's been at it again,' continues Lady Bellair, who is nothing if not malicious in a light and playful fashion. 'What!' with a careful artlessness, 'not discovered that trait of hers yet? A poor lover, say I! He can't have studied you, Nan; he hasn't given you his undivided attention. You'll throw him over if you have a spark of spirit.'

'Whose spirit? Yours?' asks Halkett, who is always a little amused and a little angry when with her. 'Do not trouble your head about either of us; we shall do very well. To make a departure—have you noticed how well Lady Branksmere is looking?'

'There is nothing else to notice,' with naïve candour. 'We've noticed all the rest of you so painfully often that it isn't to be done again. That's the worst of the country; its gossip is so limited, and grows so remarkably stale. Yes, Lady Branksmere is singularly improved. There is something in the whole *ménage*—brighter, fuller. How is it?'

'A general rejoicing over her recovery, no doubt.'

'A trifle more than that, I fancy,' dryly, 'One looks round and finds empty spaces surely. Madame missing; Staines obliterated. It suggests a compromise, eh?'

'Nonsense,' says Halkett.

'Not at all, in my opinion. Very wise, on the contrary, and very careful, but very *poor*; effect nowhere. I did the heroine of our little comedy the honour to believe she would have shown more pluck when the crisis came, whatever Monsieur might do. It was easy for him, see you? Madame was so decidedly *passée*.'

'*Pouf!* you know nothing,' whispers Mrs. Amyot lightly, who has grown very respectable since her engagement. 'Staines received his *congé* simply on account of the discovery of that little affair of his in Brussels! Everyone knows it now. Branksmere, it appears, heard of it from a man who was actually in the room when that king was played that was so decidedly *de trop*—sort of usurper, as it were.'

'Isn't she sharp!' murmurs Lady Bellair, turning her eyes full of a fond appreciation upon Mrs. Amyot. 'And what a pretty story, too. It comes in useful here. I like ingenuity. I particularly admire the way in which that *canard* has been made to fit.'

She pauses to pull her skirts aside, and to smile on Tommy Paulyn, who, with Angelica, is passing by, *en route* to the conservatory beyond.

'There is a whisper in the air that Paulyn is going to settle down with that extremely youthful cousin of his,' remarks Halkett in a low tone.

'What! that baby!'

'It was Mrs. Daryl who whispered it to me. She is a funny little woman, who tells a funny little story very well. Last evening, it appears May—one of the twins—found Paulyn with Miss Angelica in a distant and rather unfrequented part of the shrubberies, in an attitude that struck the child as being full of interest. He had his arm round her. "I think he was kissing her," said Miss May, "and though she was very red she wasn't a bit angry, and that's what I couldn't understand, because Tommy is such an ugly little thing!"'

They all laugh.

'Well, I expect Tommy could,' says Lady Bellair. 'I declare, I call it absurd! Everybody is going to be married,